Not Like You Do

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Not Like You Do

by Weconqueratdawn

Summary

On summer vacation with Hannibal, Will acts on the spur of the moment and makes a life-changing decision. Not everyone is going to approve but that's only the start of Will's problems - how much does he really know about Hannibal and will he live to regret loving him?

Set in an AU where Will is a young genderfluid student who began dating Hannibal after they met as part of his studies. Can easily be read as a standalone (I wrote it that way on purpose - see intro notes for more info!).

Illustrated by theseavoices

Notes

I'm very excited to be posting this - it's been a reeeeallly long time coming (and for anyone who's been waiting I'm sorry). This will be the last in the main series and I wanted to do it right - QS Will is very special to me and he needed a good send off :)

Three things before we begin:

1) If you're familiar with QS then take note there's a little more darkness to come here (you can probably guess why from the tags) - I may add warnings to some chapters but overall, if you're a fan of Hannibal and familiar with the show/have read some fic, I don't think there's much to worry about.
2) If you're not familiar with QS (welcome!!!!) then don't worry, there's no need to have read the other parts. There are only four in the main series and the longest is 7.5k words - essentially they cover Hannibal and Will's dating history.
3) More than anything else I've written, this fic owes an extra debt to Thomas Harris. I went back to the books for inspiration (particularly for Hannibal and his background) and you'll find allusions to them scattered throughout the fic. If you're one of those people who likes to play 'spot the reference' then happy hunting :)

And, lastly, a note on pronouns throughout the series: Will is genderfluid and uses all pronouns and favours none. Some characters refer to Will using different pronouns for Will (e.g. Bev uses she/her, Hannibal uses he/him but switches to they/them when in public). Hopefully all of this comes across clearly.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was dreaming. There was a great, purring tiger - *but tigers don't purr,* he thought, annoyed - and he was being carried away by it, down, down towards a rocky stream. The tiger's stripes were bright as burning flames and they warmed his skin as easily as fire. Will's arms were around its neck; its great padded paws were silent and they moved stealthily down the mountain as one. When they reached the valley where the stream murmured, he could see in the distance a strip of shining silver and a sky so vast and clear it looked to be made of glass.

A sudden shaft of sunlight pierced it; the sky's translucence grew brilliant. Dazzled, Will shielded his eyes. Then he stirred, blinked, and reluctantly opened them.

The light still hurt, and he had to blink a few times more to clear his vision, but it was worth it. Their drive had progressed considerably while he'd slept and the passenger window now revealed a joyful sight - a deep blue sky and below it a wave-ruffled ocean. Will rolled the window down fully and pushed his face out into the buffeting breeze.

"Conscious once again, I see," Hannibal commented. His voice was easy and relaxed, and his grip on the wheel sure and light. "Your timing is impeccable - you missed all the delights of the interstate."

The tide was out; sleek wet beaches rushed to meet the shimmering waters. Close by the road's edge dunes undulated and long grasses waved. A dog streaked past its owner, chasing a tennis ball and kicking up sand.

"I didn't *mean* to fall asleep." Will turned to Hannibal and stretched, something easily accomplished in the enormous Bentley. "If you don't want your passengers to pass out on you, you need to get a less comfortable car. One with terrible suspension and no leg room."

Hannibal laughed in the manner he reserved only for Will - indulgently and so quiet it was almost a private act.

Will grinned back at him. "I dreamed a tiger was carrying me off to sea."

"That does sound less comfortable," said Hannibal. Behind him, on the other side of the road, flashed a string of high gates and well-kept hedges. "Might raise a few eyebrows, though."

"So would the crappy car with no leg room," Will said, eyeing the huge gables protruding over fences and out between trees. All exuded an impenetrable air of money.

"What would you suggest instead?" Hannibal asked. "Your ideal transport for a vacation such as this?"

Will considered the sweep of the coast and the salt-imbued winds; already he could taste it on his lips. "Something small, soft-top," he said. "Two seats. An Alfa Romeo Duetto maybe."

Hannibal was still smiling. "What colour?"

“Red,” Will said, peering intently through the windshield and down the road ahead. They were entering a small town; traffic was backing up towards them. “Are we far from the house?”

“It’s a little further along,” Hannibal said, slowing down to join the queuing traffic. “Through this town and on the other side of the next.”

He offered no more details and neither did Will ask for any. He didn’t want them - he’d lasted the whole of the spring semester without knowing anything but the barest facts. Hannibal had a house in the Hamptons, left to him by an old patient. It was right by the beach. It had a private pool. They would see no one unless they wanted to. It could be a one-roomed shack and Will would still be happy there.

Slowly, in a long snaking queue, they passed into the main town. Here the houses faced the road and were more visible to scrutiny. All were painted subtle variations of white; all were painfully, self-consciously, picturesque. There was a main street with restaurants, bars, and boutiques, and there was at least one organic food market about which Will had a sudden presentiment that shortly they would be paying it a visit. The shoppers strewn about all had a similar appearance - blandly healthy and as glossy as magazine people come to life.

After the town, there was a less busy stretch of road and then the edge of a smaller village. The houses were much the same but set back further from the road at the end of long drives. The effect was more spacious, less forcefully quaint; it was easier for Will to imagine Hannibal here. The main street was stripped back to tourist necessities: general store, a couple of cafés, one solitary antiques shop. Will settled back into his seat and tried to wait patiently - the house must be close by.

The main street turned into a long, straight road down which plots were set at regular intervals. Gates of wrought iron and steel ticked slowly by, guarding houses hidden by tall trees; occasionally a steeply-pitched roof or weathervane could be glimpsed. It was quiet and, despite knowing the tide was a long way out, Will was sure he could hear the roar of the Atlantic.

Then Hannibal said, “Here it is,” and turned to meet a panelled solid steel gate. It slid open and the car crunched carefully up a sweeping gravel drive. He pulled up just in front of the house; Will looked greedily at it for a second then burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just surprise. Or relief. I thought it was going to be like one of those shingled beasts we drove past, bulging all over with gables and porches.” He got out of the car to better gaze up at the house - its stark white walls and wide dark windows were intriguing.

“Tigers and shingled beasts,” Hannibal said, getting out of the car too. “Your coast is full of monsters.” He came level with Will and slid an arm around his waist. “What do you think?”

“A tiger isn’t a monster, it’s just an animal out of context,” Will said, leaning into him. “I think…” He stopped and gazed up some more. The house was far from small but it definitely wasn’t a monster. It did have its back turned to them, though - its walls curved round, suggesting its true face was hidden.

“I think I need to see it from the other side,” Will said.

A broad flight of steps rose invitingly up, away from the drive. At the top was a covered walkway, connecting the garage to the entrance, and what surely must be a path down to the ocean. Will took the steps two at a time and soon found revealed the view so jealously guarded by the house. There

was the ocean and the beach, stretched wide across the horizon. The house flowed down towards it in a series of smooth concrete terraces, culminating in a modest patch of green edging the dunes. Hugged close to the house was a pool, its waters so dark and rich they were almost navy.

Hannibal had followed Will; he now stood beside him clear-eyed and smiling. The bright coastal light suited him - he already looked tan, almost as if he lived here all the time and Baltimore was nothing more than a mirage. “Well?” he prompted.

Will turned to him. It wasn’t a real question - he could already read the answer in Will’s face. But he wanted to hear Will say it and so Will wanted to say it for him.

“I think it looks like a ship,” Will said, with a grin as wide as his glee. “Like a boat on the sea.”

Hannibal moved close, wrapping Will in his arms. “Not a bloated, shingled monster?”

Will shook his head firmly. Delight filled him; he could barely contain it. “Two weeks,” he said, wonderingly. “Wow. I’m not going to want to go home.”

*

By the time half an hour had passed, Will had hastily unpacked and explored the house well enough to satisfy his curiosity. It was airy and light and open, with three generously-sized guest rooms in addition to the master. Downstairs, much of the house was open plan, making the most of the huge expanse of glass which looked out onto the pool and the terraces beyond. One room in particular marked out the house as belonging to Hannibal - a sort of study overlooking the living space from a mezzanine, filled with books and containing both a desk for drawing and a harpsichord. The room was bordered on one side by a glass balcony; from up there Hannibal could indulge in all his favourite things while enjoying a truly spectacular view of the ocean.

Ocean views, though, were everywhere. No matter which room Will entered, the windows constantly directed his attention back out to sea. The sight was too tempting for him to ignore for long, especially after a long drive. Hannibal was engaged in the kitchen, making them something to eat, but Will knew he wouldn’t be able to settle down without stretching his legs first.

He found Hannibal checking the supplies which had been left ready for their arrival. He used a property minding service - there were apparently hordes of them on the island - to take care of the house and to do everything required for a seamless start to a vacation. The beds were freshly made, the towels laundered, the pool was spotless, and the larder practically bursting.

Not that the latter was quite up to Hannibal’s standard. “This will have to do for now,” he said, frowning critically at some inoffensive-looking cold cuts lying on the counter. “Unfortunately the deli selection in the general store is not the best quality. I’ll have to go shopping tomorrow.”

Will hid his smile. “You know I’ll eat anything,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

In answer, Hannibal made a dissatisfied sound. He left the cold cuts and instead took an armful of herbs out of the crisper and placed them alongside a chopping board.

“Something light to eat after our drive and then something more substantial later,” he said. “Something warming. The wind is sharper than it seems - it’ll be cold on the terrace after sundown.”

There were a bunch of familiar-looking knives sitting in a block on the counter. He inspected one and began to sharpen it - no one, no matter how highly paid, would be trusted with such an important task. Watching him, Will experienced a sudden rush of love - for knowing Will would want to eat outside and listen to the ocean, for fussing over his food and his knives. And for insisting on bringing him here to his boat-like beach house for a vacation which Will now realised how sorely he'd needed.

"Wait," Will said. "Stop. Put that down a second?"

Ever obliging, Hannibal did. His look was expectant; Will stepped close, into his welcoming arms.

"I have something very important to say," Will said, gazing into Hannibal's face with exaggerated solemnity.

"More important than food?" Hannibal said. He smiled and touched Will's cheek, his ear; his hands smelled of lemon and parsley. "Surely not."

"Even more important than that." Will leaned forward, against the solidity of Hannibal's chest, and lingered a kiss to his lips. "I love you," he said. "And also, if you don't need my help, I have to go walk on the beach right now or else I might die."

Hannibal laughed. "I'm surprised you lasted this long," he said. "Yes, go. There will be something to eat in about half an hour. Unless that's not enough time?"

Will smiled; it was plenty.

*

To Will's intense delight, the beach could be accessed directly from the house. The little patch of green wiry grass below the terraces dropped away suddenly and, where the soil crumbled into sand, there was a secure fence and a few steps leading down to a electronic gate. Seen from the beach, the house towered up like the bridge of an ocean liner. Its windows were opaque, blankly gazing out towards the chilly blue strip of the ocean. With an inward skip of happiness, Will struck out across the soft dunes and in the direction of the shore.

The ocean had always fascinated him, even though he could count the number of times he'd seen it on the fingers of one hand. There had been Biloxi, on a rare summer trip to the boatyards with his dad. Another time, he'd visited Florida with his mom when her cousin had been sick - cancer, it had been, and the doctors had needed to operate quickly. Once a cautiously favourable prognosis had been passed, his mom had driven them into Daytona and they'd spent the day at the beach. More recently had been the time with Bev and some of her med school friends, only a few months before he'd first met Hannibal. They'd gone to Ocean City for spring break, crammed into an AirBnB place she'd found. It had been noisy and excitable and there had been a lot of hangovers; but the sea breeze had been cold and Will had managed to escape to walk alone on the beach every day.

Most of his time on the water had been at lakes, rivers, or bayous. He'd spent even longer near it, helping his dad and learning about boats and their engines as he did. Or fishing - when his dad had been at home Will had fished with him often, and when he'd worked away Will had stayed with his mom and had gone fishing on his own instead.

This stretch of coast already felt different. There was no boatyard, for a start; no tang of diesel or bait boxes left too long in the sun. There were fewer people, too. Will could see a lone figure

further towards the town, arm swinging with what he guessed was a leash, but they seemed to be the only other person for miles - even the dog was out of view. No crowds, no shouting children, no sunburned teenagers showing off; there was just the brash wind and the hot sun and the enticing smell of salt.

The tide was sweeping in quickly now. Will sat down on a dry hummock of sand to watch it and stretched out his legs. His desire to walk had waned; the waves on the shore were loud and foam-topped and the water a delicate shimmering green. He imagined himself doing this every day - lazing in the sun and returning home to Bev with a tan. Maybe with strap-marks, if he wore the bathing suit he'd brought.

When Hannibal had explained about the house and the private pool a bathing suit had been the first thing he'd thought of. For Will, what to wear was rarely a casual matter - there were many factors to take into account, both internal and external. A private pool meant the external could be allowed to fade into insignificance. There was only Hannibal to see him and Will had no fears there - Hannibal had accepted him so completely, right from the beginning, that it was now sometimes a shock to remember others were not always so unconcerned.

The dog-walker was coming closer - the dog's barks were audible and so was the owner's whistle calling it back when it strayed too far away. He faced a choice - to sit here and wait for them to pass by or to head back to the house by the dunes. His natural inclination was to preserve the silence and secrecy of the beach; to slip away back to Hannibal and pretend all of it was just for them. But he didn't particularly feel inclined to move - the waves were soothing and the distant line of the horizon was entrancing. He wanted to stay and listen, to pay attention to the sky and the wind and the water. To be interrupted by a stranger was an outright annoyance.

There was also the added complication of his appearance. Will looked down at his legs, spread out in the sun. The old pair of Converse he wore were unremarkable; but the cut-offs were a little too short to be worn by a cisgendered twenty-year old male and the legs they exposed were definitely too smooth. His hair reached his shoulders, just about; if he remained sitting on the sand with his hair shielding his face, and didn't speak, he would almost certainly pass for a tomboyish girl. That was what Hannibal had thought, when he'd first found Will bent over a book in his waiting room.

Sometimes it was extremely useful to be able to blend in like that; sometimes it was just nice to remain unnoticed and unremarked upon - a rare luxury for the gender nonconforming. But just then Will didn't want to pass as a tomboyish girl. He wanted to be himself - someone who was as happy using male pronouns as female or gender neutral ones. Someone who didn't want to choose a side and be made to stick with it.

He stood up and was busy brushing sand off the backs of his legs when the dog splashed by - it was a Labrador and too intent in its quest of exploration to stop for social niceties. The same was not true of its owner, who greeted him with an enthusiastic 'hi!' before she'd even got close.

She was a little older than Hannibal, buttery-blonde and casually windswept but wearing good, careful jewellery. He could easily picture her looking round one of the little galleries they'd driven past. Will would've bet good money that she had at least one driftwood sculpture proudly on display in her home.

"Hi!" he said and, with an effort, smiled pleasantly as she quickly looked him up and down. It struck him then that he was dressed far too scruffily for the neighbourhood - old sweatshirt, cut-

offs, battered Converse. But then again maybe he looked so out of place she wouldn't even notice the feminine touches in his appearance.

But neither seemed to register with her - instead she immediately spotted the faded Johns Hopkins logo on his sweatshirt and grew even friendlier.

"You must be one of my houseguests for the weekend," she said, beaming broadly. "James told me he was bringing some fraternity friends home - last I saw they were setting up camp in the pool house. He always forgets to introduce me - I'm Brenda, his mother."

That was all quite startling to Will: Brenda spoke loudly and quickly and with total confidence that she'd read the situation correctly.

"Uh, hi," he said. "I'm Will. And sorry - not guilty. I don't know anyone called James."

"Oh," she said. "Oh well. What a coincidence!" And she smiled again, showing all her teeth at once.

There was a pause and Will realised she was waiting for a proper introduction - if he wasn't a friend of James's he had to be *somebody* and she wanted to know who.

"I'm here on vacation," he said, waving vaguely back towards the house. "With my boyfriend."

His calculation paid off. "Oh!" Brenda said, instantly betraying her surprise. She followed Will's gesture and looked at the house with judgemental interest. "At the old Radcliffe place? It doesn't seem to get opened up much now, which seems a shame. It's in a great spot, such an unusual house."

In the distance, her dog barked for her attention. Brenda threw Will a final smile and said, "Well, have fun!"

But she looked him up and down once more, before she left him standing on the beach alone.

*

"I met one of the neighbours," Will said, as Hannibal brought out the food.

The 'something light' turned out to be open sandwiches. The disdained cold cuts had been smothered with pesto and olives, and a glass of wine, frosted with condensation, sat by Hannibal's plate. They were eating at the dining table next to the windows so that, with the doors slid fully open, it was almost as good as being outside.

"She thought I was one of her son's friends," Will continued. "I hope their house is some distance away - I predict a frat party in the pool house."

Hannibal laughed. "She might have been hopeful her son had brought home at least one polite, quiet guest."

"But maybe I'm wrong." Will shrugged and took a huge bite of his sandwich. "Maybe they're all playing chess in there."

"Chess and a Dante study group," Hannibal said. "Isn't that what every young man enjoys in his free time?"

Will put his sandwich down and leaned forward on his elbows. “I know that’s a joke. But I still have to ask-”

Hannibal smiled quietly, completely unabashed. “Of course not,” he said. “I didn’t belong to any study groups. All my interests were pursued in a solitary fashion.”

Will clapped a hand to his mouth, cackling gleefully behind it. “What a pair we are,” he said. “There’s going to be talk about us, mark my words. Brenda - that’s the neighbour - looked cheerfully scandalised when I told her I was staying here with my boyfriend. And she knew the house - she called it the ‘old Radcliffe place’?”

“Technically this is the new Radcliffe place,” Hannibal said. “Mrs Radcliffe, a late patient of mine, tore down the old house and replaced it with this one soon before she passed.”

Will looked out across the uppermost terrace at the solid concrete and steel facade curving opposite. The sun was lower in the sky and blue shadows were creeping across the floor and up the walls. “What was here before?” he asked.

“A house which had come to her from her husband’s family,” Hannibal said. “I understand his surviving relatives were not pleased about it being demolished.”

Will’s intuition sat up and took notice at this. “She talked about this with you, didn’t she?” he asked. “That’s why she left it to you and not them. She didn’t feel they understood. What was it - a family feud?”

“Of sorts.” Hannibal demurred, searching for the right words. “She… blossomed late, I suppose. She married young, and her husband was a lot older, and it took her some time to find her own path in life. She came to me as an old woman, long after her husband had died, still caught between grief at the loss and guilt over the sense of freedom she felt. She told me there was a house in her possession which she had unhappy memories of and that she was finding it difficult to decide what to do with it. Her memories, however unhappy, made it hard for her to let go of the house.”

“And what did you advise her to do, Doctor?”

“I never advise anything,” Hannibal said with a smile. “I only encourage courses of action or thought which I believe to have therapeutic value. Her issue with the house was a manifestation of underlying conflicts. I tried to focus her attention on the root of her problems but she was very determined so I supported her through it as best as I could.”

“She concluded that knocking it down and rebuilding was the most therapeutic thing she could do,” Will said. “I like the sound of her - she must have been an unconventional patient?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Hannibal said. “She didn’t stay my patient long but we did correspond from time to time afterwards - she wrote about this house and how much enjoyed her time here. I believe her decision to rebuild helped her greatly, in the end.”

“How did her family take the news she’d left the house you?” Will asked. “I presume they weren’t happy - easy to call it erratic behaviour and call a lawyer.”

“Yes, the will was contested,” Hannibal said. “But unusually the judge decided against them. She left a very long instruction, you see, explaining her decision. And she had many other properties, all valuable and all kept within the family. This was the only one she left to an outsider.”

“Did she tell you about any of this before she did it?” Will asked.

“No, not at all,” Hannibal said. “But there was a letter which arrived mixed up with the deeds. It was addressed to me - I don’t think anyone knew it was there. It’s very short, I can show it to you if you’d like.”

After they’d finished eating, Hannibal led Will up to the study. They passed a line of bookcases, making straight for a quiet, unobtrusive corner where a few pictures hung. As Will approached he noticed a frame which contained, instead of an engraving or pastel drawing like the others, a sheet of paper with handwritten lines on it.

To my valued correspondent Dr Lecter, it read.

I have left instructions in my last will and testament that upon my death this house should pass to you. But this is nothing - this is what my lawyers will tell you and you don’t need me to explain the details. This is not why I write.

I write because I have found the answer. And I want to share it with you, too. I would not have found it without your help and support - it is an answer to a question you and I discussed a long while ago. I know you will remember which one.

The past clings and we cling to it, building ourselves out of old memories. We are afraid to relieve ourselves of them, thinking they make us. They don’t. Experience might, but it passes - let everything pass.

So take the house; use it, live in it. Listen to the ocean. Let it explain what I have struggled to. You will understand, I know, if you care to.

Yours,

Mrs Charlotte Radcliffe

Will read it twice, frowning, then turned to find Hannibal watching him closely.

“What answer?” he asked. “What question? What did she mean?”

Hannibal gave a small graceful shrug. “She said she’d been trapped in the past and I’d helped to free her - she was profoundly grateful,” he said. “But I don’t recall the conversation she alludes to.”

“Well,” Will said, casting another glance at the letter, “she seems convinced you needed this answer too, whatever it was.”

“Yes, she does,” Hannibal said. “And I settled with myself I would try to accept her gift in the spirit in which she intended it to be received. I am still trying now.”

“Is that why you don’t come here often? You feel like you’ve failed her?”

As soon as he’d spoken Will realised he’d done it again. It was too easy for him to see and understand, sometimes, and it could lead him to say things which were too personal, too close to the bone. Even for Hannibal.

Hannibal had paused. Though there was clearly something uncomfortable for him in the question, he didn’t look mad that Will had asked. Only curious.

Will explained. “The woman on the beach - Brenda - she said the house wasn’t opened up much anyone. And you haven’t visited it while we’ve been together, have you? I didn’t even know it existed until you told me about this vacation.”

Hannibal nodded, both in appreciation of Will’s words and an admittance that there was something in them. “Perhaps there is a connection,” he said. “She was certain I would understand but I’ve come to think it’s something that I’m unable to.”

Will turned back to the letter. “‘Listen to the ocean’,” he read aloud. “She’s lucky her family didn’t get hold of this or the judge might not have believed she was of sound mind after all.”

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They ate dinner outside. Hannibal had been right - it was cold once the sun went down. The breeze off the sea had an edge to it, a chilly dampness brought by the breakers spilling onto the sand beyond the dunes. To combat the pervading cold, Hannibal had provided steaming bowls of beef stew, scented with five spice. Will had added blankets and storm lanterns, and the night sky was busy supplying a shocking spray of stars and a large yellow moon.

Once they’d eaten, Will pulled Hannibal over to the sun loungers. “I want to stay out for a bit longer,” he said.

They lay down, burrowed in blankets and each other. Hannibal’s arms encircled him; Will felt the faint press of a kiss to the top of his head.

“I missed you,” Will said, glancing up at him. “When I was doing all that studying, I mean. I’m glad you persuaded me into this vacation.” He snaked an arm around Hannibal’s waist, under the blankets. “Sorry I was so stubborn about agreeing to come.”

Hannibal shifted, allowing Will to get even closer. “I like your stubbornness,” he said. “Because when you say yes I know you mean it.”

Will huffed a laugh into the cold night air. “You like that I’m a challenge,” he said.

“That too,” Hannibal said. Will could hear the smile in his voice. “I imagine, should our neighbourhood gossips see us together, they will think the opposite.”

“That I’m young and impressionable and way out of my depth,” said Will. “I think nearly everybody thinks that, you know. Maybe not Bev.”

“She’s extremely perceptive,” Hannibal said. “Though I’m not sure she entirely approves of me.”

“You try very hard to make her approve,” said Will. “That’s probably why. But she does love her food so you picked a good target. I’m sure you’ll feed her into submission eventually.”

Hannibal chuckled quietly. “I suppose I’m not always as subtle as I think I am.”

“You’re used to getting what you want,” Will said. “I think that’s closer to the truth.”

Hannibal made a thoughtful sound. “That is true,” he agreed. “But I what I wanted never mattered so much - there was always a part of me which remained dispassionate. The more disinterested you remain, the easier something is to get - and there is no part of me which is dispassionate about you.”

Will listened with growing emotion. During their brief separation, so he could concentrate on his finals, he'd realised exactly how tied he felt to Hannibal. Hearing Hannibal's devotion spoken of so matter-of-factly helped heal a wound Will hadn't realised he'd sustained.

He raised himself up so he could look into Hannibal's face. "It sounds so ordinary when I tell you I love you. But you do understand, don't you? There's nothing ordinary about it. I just can't imagine you not being there."

Hannibal looked almost grave in the moonlight; grave but tender. "You are not ordinary and neither am I. We share an understanding of each other I'd not thought possible."

Will scrubbed his face, and laughed nervously. "I don't know why I'm being like this," he said. "It must be the stars or the moon or something. Or being away from home. Everything feels heightened here."

Hannibal's gaze relaxed, dropping a few shades of intensity. "We have plenty of time to settle in," he said. "Two weeks of rest."

"Yes," Will said, settling back down against Hannibal's chest once more. "Rest. No studying. No finals. No Professor Crawford."

"Has Jack been talking to you about his contacts at the FBI again?"

"No, it's that summer job he's got me in the department," Will said. "He seems to think I started yesterday, not in a couple of week's time."

Hannibal's arms tightened around Will, as if Professor Crawford might actually step out from the bushes and snatch him away. But he said, "Even if it did he won't be able to find you here."

"No, Will agreed, a slow grin gaining momentum across his face. "And I'd like to stop talking about him now."

"And why is that?"

Hannibal's voice was innocent but his smile wasn't. Will pulled free of Hannibal's arms and sat up, straddling his lap.

"Because Professor Crawford has absolutely no place in what I want to do to you next," Will said.

Hannibal's hands reached for him greedily, settling onto his hips and lightly squeezing. "I should hope not," he said, before he pulled Will down for a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know the Hamptons are not likely to be as quiet as Will finds the beach but I figure I can wavy hands some stuff because the Hannibal universe is not quite the same as ours :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

cw ~ mild recreational drug use

CONTAINS FABULOUS AND PERFECT ART BY THESEAVOICES *does happy dance*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning Will awoke to a blaze of sunlight and the magnificent sound of the sea. The sky was hidden behind the blinds but when he peeked out on the way to the bathroom he saw it was a pure and deepening blue. A restless longing swelled in him - to be outside, to go exploring, to lose himself between the vast dome of sky and the blue horizon of the sea. Lazing in bed seemed impossible but Hannibal, upon waking, proved extremely persuasive. First came a warm and very thorough fuck, swiftly followed by a particularly delicious breakfast in bed.

“You’re on vacation,” Hannibal said quite sternly, as he delivered Will’s breakfast. “Rest.”

“Rest,” Will repeated, with a nod, shovelling eggs into his mouth. “Rest and lots of sex. Yes, Doctor.”

When they finally rose, Hannibal repeated his desire to go grocery shopping - Will’s presentiment about the organic food market had not been unfounded.

“Do doctor’s orders extend to me not coming with you?” Will said. He wanted some time alone in the house to orient himself and perhaps take another walk on the beach.

“I suppose that’s fair.” Hannibal smiled warmly. “And I won’t be gone long. What would you like to do this afternoon?”

Will shrugged. “Pool? The beach? More of what we did this morning?”

Hannibal’s expression flickered briefly, torn between amusement and the kind of smouldering seriousness that suggested he’d just changed his mind about the food market.

Will laughed and kissed him goodbye. “Go,” he said. “Go inspect tomatoes and liver and cheeses. Only bring back the best. Have fun.”

“I was thinking of fish, actually,” Hannibal said, lingering by the door. “Maybe crab.”

“Whatever you decide,” Will said. And, as Hannibal still had not left, he added with a grin: “You’d better go - I’ll be hungry by the time you get home. *Starving* even, and not just for what you bring back.”

Hannibal walked out with a parting glance that made Will’s toes curl with anticipation. A minute or two later, very faintly, he could just make out the sounds of tyres on gravel.

A silence fell. For a few minutes Will wandered aimlessly around the kitchen and then out into the sitting room. The windows which ran along the edge of the room seemed to usher in freedom and potential. But instead of heeding their call, Will turned and went back upstairs. He realised what he wanted to do now that Hannibal had left him alone - what, perhaps, he'd been waiting to do since he'd arrived.

In the dressing room, Will searched through the drawers where he'd hastily dumped his stuff. He'd unpacked in such a hurry he couldn't remember where he'd put everything. But a flash of material the colour of ripe strawberries told him he'd found what he'd been looking for.

He pulled it out from the pile of clothes it was tangled in - the bathing suit, the one he'd bought in anticipation of the private pool. It was gingham and had little white cuffs at the legs and across the chest; and there were buttons too, fake ones, to lend authenticity to its vintage style - three down the back and one on at the top of each thigh. Will thought it was the most perfect thing he'd ever seen. Even when he felt boyish and dressed in shorts and t-shirts with his hair up, clothing like this was still something to be longed for.

Growing up, he'd always found a way to be who he needed to be but this had been the one thing which had eluded him. His face and his longer-than-usual curly hair had meant he could pass, if he wished, as a girl. If that meant he could wear dresses and skirts in peace, then so much the better. But wearing something so feminine when the maleness of his body was so obvious was impossible - however confident he was he still didn't think he could walk out in public in a bathing suit like this one. But here, with Hannibal… That was different.

When Hannibal returned, Will was laid out on one of the terrace sun loungers.

"Hold on!" he called, before Hannibal could step outside. He sat up from his slouch and tried to arrange himself more decoratively. Then he felt silly and just lay back instead, with his knees drawn up. "Okay, it's fine, you can come out if you want."

Hannibal emerged from the open glass doors and strode slowly over the Will; curiosity was writ large in his posture.

"Before you say anything," Will said, "I know it might be a bit much but I just can't tell anymore. I've wanted something like it for so long."

Hannibal had reached the sun lounger by then. As instructed, he didn't say anything; he just stood and looked at Will. But the sun had left his face in shadow and Will couldn't read it.

All of a sudden, Will felt horribly exposed. He looked down at his gingham-covered stomach. "Well, what do you think? Too much?"

Hannibal's weight settled onto the sun lounger, close beside Will. He still didn't speak but he didn't need to. The fingers of one hand made straight for Will's bare shoulder and trailed gently down to the crook of his elbow. The other rested on Will's raised knee. He was very near and his breath puffed warm against Will's skin. He gave a long sigh, brushing away Will's hair from his shoulder; the press of lips there caused Will's confidence to creep back.

Will reached for something tucked into the side of the sun lounger. "What about these?"

He brought out the pair of heart-shaped sunglasses and slid them on, grinning. Hannibal's face became a shade more amused.

“Don’t worry,” Will said. “I know they’re definitely too much. They’re from Bev - she said they went with the outfit.”

“And yet you’re wearing them,” Hannibal said, now openly smiling. He toyed softly with the lowest button at Will’s back.

“And yet I’m wearing them,” Will confirmed. “I’m on vacation, after all. No more serious study - just rest and sex, sun and fun.”

He leaned back into Hannibal, who obligingly took his weight while he examined the little straps and the edging of the sweetheart neckline. There were more kisses, each deliberately placed on Will’s neck and shoulders; Will closed his eyes and enjoyed them. But they flew open again when Hannibal clicked his tongue and vanished. He watched Hannibal go into the house and waited, wondering what had called him away. Had the phone rung?

When he returned, he had a bottle of what looked like lotion and a brown paper bag.

“Sun screen,” Hannibal said, and gestured for Will to sit up. Will did as he was told, holding his hair out of the way. Hannibal applied it with care, rubbing in small circles and gently scolding him at the same time. “You must use it every day. You’ve already caught the sun on your chest.”

“Have I?” Will said, pulling one of the straps aside to check. “Oh. Well, I guess I have. The sun must be stronger than I thought.”

“Hmmmn,” Hannibal said. “Let it sink in before you lie back down again.”

Will fought the urge to laugh. “You remember where I grew up, right? I’ve seen off plenty of weather which would have given you sun stroke.”

Hannibal, untouched by Will’s arguments, blobbed some on Will’s nose with his finger. “You have a delicate complexion,” he said. His face was composed and his jaw was stubborn.

Will took the sunglasses off and stared at him, speechless.

“Shall I finish the job?” Hannibal asked in a mildly threatening manner. He was still holding the lotion.

Will started to laugh and, once he’d begun, he couldn’t stop. After a few seconds Hannibal joined in.

But he said, “I’ll take that as a yes,” and started to reach for Will’s face.

Will batted his hands away, still giggling. “I can manage,” he said. “But you might as well do the rest of me.” He stretched out his legs and wiggled them for emphasis.

Quietly triumphant, Hannibal moved round, took them across his lap, and set to work. As he rubbed sun screen onto his nose and across his cheeks, Will watched him massage his palms along them, broad and warm. Hannibal’s fingers teased a little under the legs of his bathing suit; Will squirmed pleasantly against the intrusion.

Hannibal poured out more lotion and rubbed lightly it between his palms, preparing for further ministrations.

“So who does *your* back when you’re on vacation?” Will said, lifting his knee so Hannibal could reach his calf.

“Sadly, I’ve had to cope on my own,” Hannibal said, adopting a sorrowful tone.

“Not this time, though.” Will surveyed Hannibal’s clothing. He was wearing an open-necked shirt and loosely tailored pants. “Want to slip into something more comfortable so I can repay the favour?”

“No need,” Hannibal said. He wiped his hands on Will’s towel and stood to unbutton his shirt. Off it came, with Will watching hungrily. He’d just started on the pants when he noticed the brown bag still lying where he’d left it on the lounger. “Those are for you as well,” he said.

It was a bag of peaches, smelling exactly like freshly-picked peaches should. Will took a bite and paused to wipe juice from his mouth: it was good. Very good.

“Freshly picked in Louisiana,” Hannibal said. “Or so they told me - were they telling untruths?”

Will nodded with enthusiasm. “Pretty damn close, I’d say. I haven’t had one this good for a while.” He sucked more juice off his hand and realised Hannibal had stopped undressing to watch him. “Aren’t you going to carry on the show?”

Hannibal smirked and folded his shirt up. “There’s no show if there’s no tease,” he said.

“There’s no show if there’s no audience,” Will pointed out. “Come on, hurry up - I’m getting impatient.”

But a sound interrupted them - a doorbell. A hidden speaker played a jangling tone out over the terrace.

Hannibal frowned, displeased. “Maybe it’s the mail,” he said, pulling his shirt back on.

He marched back into the house but soon came back with an envelope, already opened. “News travels fast,” he said. “We have an invitation.” He held it out to Will.

“From who?” Will asked, even as he was unfolding it to read.

“From Anna Komeda,” Hannibal said.

It was invitation to a garden party - a *literary-themed* garden party, no less - and it was addressed to them both. Will’s heart sank.

“How does she even know we’re here?” He’d been introduced to Mrs Komeda at a concert and she’d instantly grasped his place in Hannibal’s life. Invitations had followed - according to Hannibal she collected interesting people and it was quite clear that Will was on her acquisitions list. “Does she have a house up here too?”

“Not close by,” Hannibal said. “Don’t worry - though she can be determined, she’s also extremely courteous. She’d understand if we declined - we are on vacation and may wish to not be disturbed.”

“You make it sound like a honeymoon,” Will said. He stared at the invitation again. “Do we have to answer it now?”

Hannibal plucked it from his fingers and cast it aside. Off came the shirt again and his pants were swiftly unbuttoned. He stood to push them down.

“I think we have more important matters to attend to, don’t you?”

Will grinned and instantly forgot about all Mrs Komeda and her party, as easily as he’d forgotten Professor Crawford the night before.

*

The days passed like the dripping of honey. It seemed to Will that he’d never felt so rested or so at ease.

“I didn’t realise how tired I was,” he said one morning, after another long and refreshing night’s sleep. “Or how hard I’d been working. I feel much better now; more alive.”

“Well-rested and well-fucked,” Hannibal said, nudging his heavy warmth closer against Will’s side.

Will smiled into his pillow. He loved it when Hannibal was coarse - it was a private glimpse under his polite, well-mannered clothing.

“Well-fed, too. Does us all good to remember our animal needs,” he said. “Thank you again for the vacation. It’s perfect.”

So far it had been much lazier than Will had expected. The possibility of a day’s sailing had been raised but not acted upon. Will had thought he’d be eager for a boat trip and a little fishing, but time had slowed and he’d found he liked it that way. Between his studies and his extracurricular reading and his summer jobs, there wasn’t much time for doing nothing back in Baltimore. His weekends at Hannibal’s were the nearest thing he had to an indulgence but they were over quickly. *It’s a vacation*, he told himself. *This is what people do on vacation. Just relax and enjoy it.*

Their activities outside the house had been limited to a few trips into the neighbouring towns, to eat or just to walk on different beaches, or to visit gift shops in search of something suitable for Bev. Will was on a quest - one which Hannibal had been roped into - to find the most awful, most tasteless piece of tourist garbage possible. It was a task which was proving difficult - everything he’d found had been made in the spirit of blandest good taste. So much so that Hannibal tried to argue it didn’t count as good taste at all.

“Anything which aims only to be inoffensive has nothing at all to recommend it’s existence,” he said, balefully eyeing a display of painted fridge magnets. “It should do the decent thing and make way for something more life-enhancing.”

Will mentally rejected a series of postcards by local hobby artists - they weren’t very good but they weren’t very bad, either. “Are you seriously suggesting those magnets should self-destruct?”

“The magnets cannot be expected to improve themselves,” Hannibal replied. “Their destiny is to end up as landfill, like everything in this store. It’s the owner who’s to blame.”

Will snickered and elbowed him. “Shush, she’ll hear you. You’re being *rude*, Hannibal.”

For once, Hannibal didn’t seem to care. The owner had, by simple extension of the goods she sold, offended him somehow. He walked them straight out of the gift shop and into an antiques store

across the road.

“You’ll find something better for Bev in here,” he said.

Will looked around. Though described as an antiques store on the outside, in some corners it more closely resembled a junk shop. The antiques places Will had been to with Hannibal were usually refined and specialised, highly curated by their dealers. This was… not. His eyes scanned over a jumble of objects. An old tin toy and a battered suitcase, a pair of shoes on a three-legged stool. Numerous mismatched teapots in gaudy colours. A framed collection of faded butterflies with torn wings.

“Some of the stuff in here is as tacky as anything we looked at in that shop,” Will said. But it was a token protest - he knew exactly what Hannibal meant. Nothing was bland, nothing was forgettable. And the strange collection of items brought haphazardly together made for more interesting browsing, however unpleasant some of them might be. Life-enhancing, Hannibal might’ve called it.

They passed a wall of dolls - older ones of plaster and porcelain and newer ones of grimy pink plastic were jumbled together with an eerie effect - and found themselves near another window display.

“Aha!” Will said, making directly for it. “Perfect. Shit covered in shells.”

Hannibal’s smile was only a little smug. Together they chose a weird and lumpy shell figure which reclined in what was obviously supposed to be a seductive pose. All it had for a face was a wide toothy grin made by the opening of a small smooth conch. Will picked it up and studied it: it was more glue than shell.

“It’s grotesque,” Will said. “She’ll love it.”

They dawdled around the town for another hour or so: Will perusing books he didn’t intend to buy in the little bookstore while Hannibal busied himself in a deli.

“Have you thought any more about Mrs Komeda’s invitation?” he asked, as they drove home. “I forgot all about it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said. “I sent her a note thanking her for the invitation and said we would drop in if we were free. I thought that would be best. We can decide on the day - I’ll send our apologies if we choose not to go.”

“I thought it would be more formal than that,” Will said. “Is it a ‘drop-in’ kind of party?”

“Possibly not,” Hannibal said, “but I felt I could take a small liberty.”

Will fell silent. Though Hannibal said ‘we’ he knew he meant Will: if *Will* didn’t want to go. Hannibal, of course, would. And he knew they had history - Hannibal had had some kind of affair with Mrs Komeda, long ago, when he’d first arrived in Baltimore. *She must know him*, Will thought. *What he’s like, underneath. So of course he feels he can take a small liberty.*

“I’m not dressing up,” he said stubbornly. “I don’t even do that for Bev.” Bev had an unexplained penchant for themed parties and Will put up with it as best he could. It was, possibly, her only fault.

“If that’s your main objection, that part is not compulsory,” Hannibal said. “Many guests won’t.”

Will sighed and faced the inevitable: attending now seemed inescapable. And he had to admit he was curious about Mrs Komeda. He knew a little about her from Hannibal - she wrote novels, though he had no idea what sort. Mr Komeda was dead - she’d remarried but kept the name. And she kept inviting Will to her parties and he kept finding excuses not to go.

It was probably time to admit defeat.

“I might be able to handle dropping-in,” Will said. “For a couple of hours. Even if it isn’t a dropping-in kind of party.”

Hannibal said nothing, only nodding to show that he’d heard. But his face, to Will, looked pleased.

*

The day of the party was stiflingly hot. The sky was clear when Will awoke but the air had a stillness which suggested rain clouds might build out of nowhere. Before lunch he took a walk along the shore to prepare himself for the afternoon ahead. The atmosphere was fresher there; the waves flowed smoothly in and out with soft spilling breakers. He met no one and walked back to the house with a decision forming in his mind.

The perpetual issue of what to wear had an added significance that day. Will opened all the drawers and cupboards in the dressing room, laying bare his clothes with determination. Mrs Komeda thought he was interesting enough to add him to her collection. Partly that was due to his association with Hannibal - he suspected anyone Hannibal showed off in society would be of interest. But in Will’s case there was the added seasoning of his youth and his fluid gender. When Hannibal had introduced them at the concert, Will had been wearing something only subtly feminine. Now he wondered what would happen if he upped the ante.

He was ready even before Hannibal had finished in the shower. Will clomped downstairs in his sandals and waited.

As soon as Hannibal appeared, Will stood up to give him a better view. He didn’t need to ask how he looked or what Hannibal thought - the implication was clear.

Hannibal smiled. Without discussing it beforehand, their dress complimented each other’s perfectly - Hannibal’s cream linen suit and coral tie sat beautifully alongside Will’s ivory broderie anglaise sundress and subtle peach-tinted makeup.

Once he saw the look on Will’s face, Hannibal’s smile turned into a laugh. “You look like a thundercloud on a summer’s day,” he said, touching him lightly under the chin. He took Will’s hands. “We don’t have to go,” he reminded. “It’s only a party.”

Will shook his head. “I do,” he said. “If not here, then in Baltimore.”

Hannibal looked him over carefully. “So you’ve donned your armour and are ready for battle?”

“Something like that,” Will said. “She’s curious about me - and about us. And *I’m* curious what she’ll make of me like this.”

“Let’s hope she passes the test, then,” Hannibal said, raising an eyebrow. “For her sake, at least.”

Will paused. “Do I really look that fierce?”

Hannibal chuckled. “Perhaps you should at least *try* to look friendly once we arrive. Just in case the other guests get spooked by your war-like expression and hide behind the canapes.”

*

Mrs Komeda’s house turned out to be one of the bloated, shingled beasts Will had derided. It spread itself out bulkily across extensive grounds, swollen with eaves and porches. Once admitted inside they found plenty of people already there. And, as Hannibal had predicted, few of them were in any kind of costume.

A waiter appeared almost immediately, bearing a tray of champagne. Hannibal took a glass but Will shook his head - he didn’t feel equal to it just yet. Drinking wasn’t something he liked to do when he was nervous - it seemed to heighten his nervousness, making it spiky and shrill in his chest. And he *was* nervous. Though the house was spacious enough to walk round the clustered groups without squeezing by, it was hot and noisy and interested faces kept peering round at them as they passed. Chink by chink, Will felt his carefully-donned armour slipping.

Hannibal gently ushered him further inside, away from the main throng. He caught a glimpse of greenery outside, and a shaded awning with more people, and then beyond that trees edging a wide smooth lawn. But before they could make it as far as the door, Mrs Komeda herself glided over. She wore a silver dress edged with black fringing and had a small headdress to match. She matched the room’s decoration - tall plumes of white feathers fanned up from tables and the ceilings were stringed with silver beads and tiny lights.

“*Hannibal*,” she said, stressing his name in a way which could have meant something or it could have meant nothing at all. “And Will, too! I’m *delighted* you could join us.”

Hannibal smiled back. “And we’re delighted to be here.”

Will was silent. Often he’d found polite, meaningless chit-chat a struggle but here it was beyond his capabilities altogether.

Mrs Komeda grasped Will’s arm and squeezed it lightly. “Just a little informal gathering,” she said. “And I must be rude and leave you before I’ve barely said hello - Warren is *insisting* on telling me a very dull story and I’d rather get it over with. I will find you both later for a *proper* talk.”

They watched her thread her way through little knots of people until she disappeared into the crowd. Will looked pointedly at Hannibal, eyebrow raised.

“It *is* more informal than is usual,” Hannibal said.

“Baltimore society letting their hair down,” Will said, wryly surveying the scene. The men all wore jackets, even if most didn’t wear a tie like Hannibal. The women were all in cocktail dresses and heels. *I’m underdressed*, he thought with an inward sigh. “Will there be jello shots at midnight? Karaoke?”

Hannibal once more set a course for the garden. “Mrs Komeda’s connections extend much further than Baltimore,” he said. Someone in a group they passed tried to catch his eye but he swerved it expertly, carrying on like he hadn’t noticed.

Will felt a touch guilty. He pulled his arm back from Hannibal's and said, "It's okay. You go, talk for a bit. I'll go wander round outside. It might even be easier on my own - nobody will care who I am if you're not with me." The last part was certainly true - all the eager eyes noticed Hannibal first, and only then swivelled questioningly round to his young companion and his sundress. "Once I've settled down I'll be fine."

Hannibal's face was skeptical and the gentle touch on the small of Will's back betrayed his inclination to act as chaperone. But he assented. "Just for half an hour," he said. "I'll come find you - under the trees?"

Will nodded. He turned and walked away, instead of watching Hannibal being welcomed into one of those staring, chattering groups. It bothered Will in a way it hadn't before. Hannibal moved too easily through the world at large - he might have found something unnerving in it if he hadn't known him so well.

Once outside, the hot clamminess which had settled on him lessened. The air was fresher and freer, though the heat of the day had continued to build. Many of the guests were fanning themselves with whatever came to hand; their incessant noise evaporated up into the wide sky above. Most were grouped under the awning, close to tables laden with refreshments. Around and over them were strung lights and unlit lanterns studded the grass at the edges of the lawn.

Will moved past the lanterns and over the lawn, into the dappled shade of the trees. They were broad and spreading, good mature trees which broadcasted wealth as loudly as the rest of house did. They were also strung with lights and Will followed their strands deeper into the garden, finding more clumps of people but now in much smaller groups. Voices were quieter and more confidential, except for the children who darted shrieking through the shrubbery, playing games. Adults hung about in twos and threes, supervising and perhaps also, like Will, escaping for a few moments of quiet.

No one paid him much attention. A girl in red streaked past, the bow of her dress undone and trailing behind her like a comet. A woman in an elegant black shift and pearls crossed in front of him, holding two tall glasses stuffed with ice, cucumber and strawberries. She joined a distinguished-looking man standing by a weeping willow and together they disappeared under its umbrella.

Deeper into the garden, the trees were younger. Will found one with low hanging branches, partly sheltered on one side by a convenient shrub, and stopped. The sounds of the party were more distant; birds could be heard singing overhead. He leaned against the tree's trunk and reached for his purse, feeling his mind stilling already. But his peace was short-lived. A sudden figure emerged from behind the shrub, neatly cutting off any possibility of escape.

"It *is* you!" the figure exclaimed. It was Brenda, Will saw, from the beach. He almost couldn't believe it. His mouth opened in surprise and his fingers gave up their fumbling inside his purse.

"I just got a glimpse of your face as you passed us - we're over there, in that little enclosure behind the hedge - and I wanted to make sure before I said hi." She had now fully circled the tree, coming to a dead stop in front of Will; the moment when she realised that he was wearing a dress and lip gloss was excruciatingly plain. But she gripped her glass of wine and plunged bravely on; all her teeth were on show again. "How is your vacation going? Are you here for long?"

A sudden tiredness descended on Will. He simply wanted her to go away. "We're here another week," he said, with smile so fake and bright even she must notice. He fished around inside his

purse again and brought out his vaporiser. “And it’s been lovely. Very *quiet*, just how we like it.”

The way he emphasised ‘quiet’ made her pause. She eyed the vaporiser uncertainly, perhaps wondering what it was, though she wouldn’t need to ask once he’d got it fired up - she’d be able to smell that for herself.

But she was interrupted - another person was approaching, someone Will couldn’t yet see. Brenda turned to them and smiled a society smile. Will sagged with relief - it must Hannibal, come to find him earlier than planned.

Or perhaps not. Brenda purred, “*Wonderful* party, Anna,” and then promptly vanished into the bushes, presumably back to her friends. Perhaps the interruption had been a relief to them both.

Anna’s shoes came into view first, and the rest of her followed. It was Mrs Komeda.

Gratitude made Will say: “I thought you were Hannibal coming to the rescue.”

Mrs Komeda looked thoughtful for a moment. “He would be useful for that but I’m sure we can manage on our own. And you mustn’t mind Brenda - she’s extremely eager, poor thing. Probably seeking a distraction from those dreadful children of hers.”

To Will’s surprise, Mrs Komeda produced a cigarette, almost out of nowhere, and expertly lit it.

“They’re always hanging around the place,” she went on. “And so conventional! At least mine had the good graces to soundly reject everything they’d been raised to believe in.”

Will’s mind whirled with this new information: he wasn’t sure how he’d ended up *intime* with Mrs Komeda, but that seemed to be exactly where he was. Unless she was like this with everyone?

“She thought I was a friend of her son’s when we first met,” Will said. He gestured at his outfit. “I doubt she’d make that mistake now.”

“Well, no, I should hope not,” Mrs Komeda said. “Have you seen them? Enormous great lumps. Simply *huge* around the neck, like baboons. They’d never carry that off like you do.”

Will started to laugh - he couldn’t help himself. Then he remembered his vaporiser. “Would you mind?” he asked Mrs Komeda, waving it aloft. “It is your party, after all.”

She frowned a little, momentarily confused.

“Er,” he said. “I don’t really drink. So I bring my own kind of social lubrication.” He ignited it so it could heat the herb already packed inside. A fragrant, heavy scent was soon noticeable.

“Oh!” she said. “Well, in that case, how could I refuse?” She leaned in and sniffed. “It smells very good. Exactly like Laos in 1993.”

Will, with an effort, refrained from telling her Hannibal grew it next to his tomatoes.

They smoked in silence for a minute or two. Will had the sense she was waiting for the right moment to say something. Could it have been the reason she had followed him into the garden? Now his irritation at Brenda had faded and the pot had set to work soothing his mind, he was sure that she had. But he found he didn’t really mind; he only wanted to know why.

“I have to ask,” she asked suddenly. “Have you figured it out yet? His great secret?”

Though he’d been expecting something surprising, Will was still startled. “Who? Hannibal?”

“Who else?” she said. “I should think if anyone were to unearth it, it would be you.”

Will stared at her. He decided to leave the ‘it would be you’ part uncommented on. “What makes you so sure he has one?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Mrs Komeda asked. “Men like him definitely do.”

Will genuinely didn’t know what to say to that. As far as he knew there was only one man like Hannibal - he had no experience with any others.

“In all the years I’ve known him, I’ve never managed it,” Mrs Komeda said, carefully stubbing out her cigarette on a nearby tree stump. “But maybe I enjoy him more without knowing - just as a delicious enigma.”

She noticed Will’s frown and gave his arm a reassuring pat. “As if you have any competition!” she said. “My admiration is only a spectator sport. Aside from his dinner parties, that is - I am a full and active participant in those and encourage them whenever I can.”

Then she changed the subject and their conversation strayed into more conventional territory. She asked Will about his studies and her interest was sincere when she learned criminal and forensic psychology were his interests. In return, Will found out her novels were all psychological crime thrillers. Somehow, he ended up telling her about Professor Crawford’s efforts to encourage him into an internship at the FBI.

“And what would you do then?” she was asking when Hannibal arrived. “Another degree or a career in law enforcement? Or both?”

“Well…” Will said, repeating the answer he’d given both to his parents and to Hannibal. “I don’t know. I always thought I’d do research, maybe teach, but Professor Crawford thinks I’d have a shot at working in the field. I guess I’d have a better idea if I got an internship.”

She turned to Hannibal, who was watching their conversation with undisguised humour. “I hope you’re going to give this young person every facility,” she said. “It’s shocking but I don’t know anyone at the FBI. Imagine the *thrill* if Will became an agent.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Will said hastily. “I haven’t even applied for an internship yet. And there’s hundreds of ways of working for them without being an agent.”

Hannibal chuckled, and inserted himself between Will and Mrs Komeda. “Poor Will - everyone who meets you seems to become invested in your future. But pay no attention - Mrs Komeda is thinking chiefly of her parties and her books. A criminal profiler would be a valuable addition, would it not?”

Mrs Komeda smiled warmly and touched a hand to Will’s arm. “Will is welcome at any of my parties, no matter what.”

To Will’s horror he found himself blushing. The compliment was unexpected and he wasn’t entirely sure what he’d done to deserve it.

Hannibal slipped an arm around his waist. “In that case,” he said, “it’s worth keeping in mind that Will only likes large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy.”

Mrs Komeda gave a pleased laugh. “No dinner parties then,” she said. “And now I will give up my portion of intimacy and leave you both in peace. Perhaps later we will share an amused glance from opposite sides of the room or knock elbows at the punchbowl.” And with that, she fluttered a hand and departed.

“No jello shots but there is a punchbowl,” Will commented, after she was out of hearing. “I’m learning a lot today.”

Hannibal gave him a broad smile. “Feeling better?” he said, casting a meaningful look at the vaporiser.

“Maybe,” Will answered. “Mrs Komeda complimented me on the smell. I was very tempted to tell her where I got it from.”

Hannibal took his arm and they wove gently through the trees, back to the lawns and the refreshment tables. The crush had lessened somewhat so Will took advantage to load up a plate with canapes. Hannibal acquired two glasses of champagne and they retreated back to the shade to eat.

There were a couple of stone benches close to the edge of the trees and a scattering of wrought iron chairs and tables on the lawns, but all were occupied. Will found a shaded spot near a sycamore and made to sit on the ground, but Hannibal stopped him.

“Your dress,” he said. “Here.” He slid his jacket from his shoulders and placed it, lining downwards, onto the grass.

Will stared at him. “That’s crazy,” he said. “My dress can go in the washer. Your jacket can’t. It must’ve easily cost twenty times more.”

“None of that matters,” Hannibal said. “Please, I insist.”

“Or we could just stand?” Will asked, but Hannibal looked so immovable that it was easier to comply. Will shrugged. “It’s your laundry bill,” he said, and sat down.

Hannibal joined him on the grass. Will picked at his plate unseeingly for a few moments.

“You know you don’t have to do all that with me, right?” he asked. “I don’t care about any of that stuff, I’m not-”

Hannibal turned swiftly to him. “I would do these things for any date - do you really think I’d do less for you?”

Will frowned, thinking hard. From their position, all the guests were arrayed in front of them, watchful and gossipy. “You want them to see,” he said. “Like when you took me to the concert on opening night.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal said. “But there are other factors guiding my behaviour. For instance, if you’d decided today was a day for masculine tailoring I may have acted differently.”

Will chewed his lip and considered that. “Okay,” he said, finally. “I guess social etiquette is as performative as gender. What would you do if I’d decided today was a flannels-and-engine-tinkering kind of day?”

“Then I’d let you sprawl in the grass like the greasemonkey urchin I know you are at heart,” Hannibal said.

Will laughed loud enough to startle a woman standing close to them. She gave him an annoyed look but Will didn’t care. He cheerfully accepted a glass of champagne from Hannibal and sipped it, returning her stare shamelessly until she turned back to her group.

After that, they sat quietly, watching the other guests as if from a great distance, even though the nearest stood only a few feet away. From above there came a muffled rumble of thunder but the sky was still achingly blue and unclouded. Will leaned against Hannibal’s side, feeling secure and peaceful.

“Do you know all these people?” he asked, after a moment.

“A few,” Hannibal said. “Not all. Mrs Komeda is extremely well-connected.” He leant closer to Will and began pointing some out. “There’s the Carmichaels and Alexander Hirst - they have controlling interests in the same technology company. And that’s Vanessa Kline - she runs a children’s charity.”

Will was only half-listening. “You call her ‘Mrs Komeda’,” he said. “I noticed that earlier. Why not Anna?”

“Because it’s how she likes to be addressed,” Hannibal said. “A sobriquet crossed with a trademark. It’s her identity and passport rolled into one.”

Will thought of Brenda earlier, reaching for badly-informed intimacy by using her first name. Poor Brenda, as Mrs Komeda might have said.

The little girl in the red dress was racing past them; somehow she got tangled in the trailing ends of her bow and knocked straight into Hannibal’s side, spilling champagne onto the grass.

She halted immediately and stared at him huge-eyed, on the brink of tears. “M’sorry,” she mumbled, and made an odd sort of bobbing curtsey in apology.

Hannibal smiled kindly at her. “Accidents happen,” he said, steadying her with a gentle hand. “You’re not hurt?”

She shook her head hard from side-to-side. Now that she saw she wasn’t going to get in trouble her tears had dried up.

“Your bow is undone,” he said. “Shall I fix it for you so you don’t trip again?”

The girl scratched her nose and then said, in a loud clear voice which she must have practiced, “Yes-please-thank-you.”

Hannibal laughed to himself and she allowed him to re-tie her bow. Once done, she checked his handiwork before running off again, already having forgotten her accident. They both watched her streak away out of sight under the trees.

Will had watched all of it in silence, feeling both warmed and pained at Hannibal's ease with her. Possibly it was just an extension of his sociability, but there had been something his manner which suggested practice and which led Will to think of Hannibal's own family. His baby sister had died in a car accident when he'd been young. Unless he'd had more experience with children than Will knew of, his ease must have sprung from those early years. And he couldn't help but wonder if Hannibal had thought of her too.

Before he could think more about it there came a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder. Both of them peered upwards; after a few sluggish spots of rain, the heavens opened. Will leapt up and so did Hannibal, snatching up his jacket from the grass. The rain fell in sheets and with such force it ricocheted off the ground. From around them came shrieks and screams; most of the guests ran for the house. Those already under the awning squashed up to make room for incomers; others ducked inside in search of things to dry off with. For Will and Hannibal, the sycamore was much nearer. And the rain was too intense - those who risked a dash across the lawns arrived dismayed and dripping.

Under the tree, Hannibal offered his jacket up to Will like an umbrella. But Will shook his head, dislodging several fat droplets from his hair and one from the end of his nose. He was already wet through - he could feel his dress sticking to his back.

"Too late," he said. "And it's not so bad under here."

The tree was mature and broad-leaved and if they stood close to the trunk only a few splashes of rain penetrated. Hannibal was in much the same state as Will - his white shirt was sodden, especially across the shoulders and chest. But it was of thick, quality cotton - unlike Will's dress.

"Um," Will said, looking down - his dress was near transparent. "But maybe you could use that jacket to protect my modesty?"

"Oh dear," Hannibal laughed, after seeing the state of Will's clothing. He wrapped his jacket round Will's shoulders and pulled him close. "Are you cold?"

"No," Will sighed. "Just exposing myself to a party of rich strangers."

"The lightning seems to have passed over," Hannibal observed. "We should be fine under this tree. If we stay here your dress might have time to dry a little."

Will shifted nearer still and put his arms around Hannibal's neck. "Maybe some body heat might help?"

Outside of the tree's protection the rain pelted down; Hannibal's grip tightened around his waist. "I'm sure it would," he said, his mouth tantalisingly close to Will's. "It might also add to your problems, if we take it too far."

But he kissed him anyway. Will's skin tingled; he opened his mouth and urged Hannibal to do the same. He wished they were alone. He wished they were back at the beach house, free to do whatever they wanted, wherever they liked. The heat of Hannibal's skin burned out through the wet shirt to greet Will's palms. If he could taste it, it would be salty on Will's lips.

Will withdrew a little. "Maybe you could take me home?" he said. "Like the perfect gentleman would?"

“And when we get home?” Hannibal asked, pressing his mouth to Will’s neck instead. “What does your perfect gentleman do then?”

The muffled roar of the rain suddenly ceased, like someone turning off a tap. Will pulled the jacket tighter around himself and thrust his head out to look at the sky.

“Come on, now!” he urged, grabbing Hannibal’s wrist. Together they squelched over the lawn and into the house.

Inside was a babble of noise and humidity. Will noticed little which wasn’t Hannibal. Some of his polite veneer had been washed away by the storm; jacketless, wet, hair falling across his eyes. And there was a glint of fierce exhilaration in his gaze, which was directed entirely at Will. Will forgot about everyone else and kissed him again, laughing. Someone handed him a towel; he took it absently. Hannibal was laughing too, pressing the towel to his face, and then to Will’s.

“Oh my goodness!” Mrs Komeda exclaimed. With an effort, Will pulled his attention away from Hannibal to look at her - she was entirely unscathed, dry as a bone and clutching a cocktail glass. “Soaked, both of you! But you look so charming together, like shipwreck survivors - I wouldn’t change a thing. So selfish of me, I know. If you need a powder room, Will dear, you can use mine.”

Will knew how he must look, with his smudged eyes and smeared lips. It didn’t matter a bit. He hadn’t felt this much himself since he’d stepped through her door.

He grasped hold of Hannibal’s hand. “I think we’re going to go home,” he said, glancing at Hannibal and finding only heated confirmation there. “Thanks for the party. It was-”

“Eventful?” Mrs Komeda said. “Indeed. Full of surprises, new friends, new confidences. The best parties happen by accident.”

Over her shoulder, blurred through the rain-spotted windows, ran the little girl in the red dress.

Chapter End Notes

Here is the bathing suit (as drawn by theseavoices)!! Also you can read about Hannibal's greenhouse and what he grows in it in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, if that's something which interests you :)

When Hannibal says "it’s worth keeping in mind that Will only likes large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy," he’s quoting from *The Great Gatsby* and suit the theme of Mrs Komeda’s party.

Go show theseavoices some love over here for their mad skills and general brilliance :D

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The drive home took fifteen minutes and Will couldn't stop grinning for a single one of them. Hannibal kept hold of his hand and when he needed to let go to drive Will gripped Hannibal's thigh instead. It was impossible to not touch each other.

They said nothing at all, having nothing to say that words were good for. As soon as the car was confined in the garage, Will was struggling out of his seatbelt and into Hannibal's lap. Their clothes were damp and uncomfortable, their mouths hot and slick. Will's dick was hard, straining at his underwear. Hannibal's hands were groping up, under his dress, breathing hard in his ear. Then-

"Upstairs," Hannibal said. "Now."

Will half-fell and was half-carried out of the car. There followed an uncoordinated trip through the house, moving with purpose towards the bedroom only to stop again to clash together, grinding each other up against doors, walls, anything which provided a flat surface. Finally they made it to the bed, Will flat on his back and his legs in a tangle with Hannibal's. His dress was shoved up around his thighs, with Hannibal already reaching under it, hands sliding over his thighs, his hips, finding the ridge of his cock in his underwear, squeezing it softly through stretchy cotton edged with lace.

Will let out a desperate groan, borne both of relief and a surge of need, and struggled to pull his dress over his head. The lace bralette he wore underneath was also wet; he peeled that off too and flung them both onto the floor.

Hannibal's efforts had slowed a little. He'd pulled Will's panties further down over his hips, keeping his dick trapped inside, and was kissing his belly. Will squirmed, entranced. Eyes closed, Hannibal's noble, proud face was bowed, mouth working over Will's skin. The sight was beautiful; he was beautiful. Will touched him, tracing his nose and the scar across the bridge with a finger. Hannibal's eyes flickered open and fixed upon him. They watched Will as he drew a line along his cheekbones and down to his jaw. His full and fascinating mouth was still pressed to Will's belly, lips dragging, tongue smearing and tasting. Will touched the corner then plucked softly at his bottom lip; Hannibal stilled and let him touch. Then he turned his head and enveloped Will's finger in his mouth with a hot and velvety tongue. Will pushed deeper; Hannibal opened his mouth wider and gnawed on it like a bone.

Will gave a sharp intake of breath. His words came out slurred with lust. "I wanna fuck you."

Hannibal's expression became deeper, fiercer. "How?"

Will didn't even have to think about it. "On your back," he said. "Knees up, spread wide."

Hannibal paused, panting, his teeth bared almost like an animal. They stared at each other a second more and then they were up and moving: Will scrambling to his knees, grabbing the lube off the nightstand, and Hannibal out of his clothes. He still had his shirt on, half-unbuttoned, when Will bent over him.

“It doesn’t matter, just leave it.” Will’s hands were shaking with want, so much of it that he spilled lube all over the bed. “Shit, fuck. Ah, god, just - give me a minute.”

He shoved his panties down and reached for his dick, slicking it up quickly. His hand felt so good there; he had Hannibal spread out below him, watching tense and dark-eyed, the solid line of his cock lying across his hip. Will had to consciously make an effort to pull his hand away. Hannibal remained still and waiting, his chest heaving in silent pants; Will leaned over him, luxuriating in his power. He unfastened the rest of Hannibal’s buttons and shoved the shirt apart, exposing his torso. Smirking, he raked greedy fingers through Hannibal’s chest hair, ducking his head to drag his tongue roughly over a nipple.

“I was thinking about doing that under the tree,” he said, and then he was urging Hannibal to lift his knees and his fingers were seeking his hole.

Hannibal made a soft sound; his body accepted Will easily and he pushed back for more. Will adjusted his stance and slowly thrust in deeper.

“*Fuck*.” That was all Will could manage. He clung on to his senses, gathering himself, arms trembling with the effort of holding himself up. Below him, Hannibal sighed, writhed the slightest amount. Will met his eyes - they were open, smiling; a challenge.

Will felt the call like a jolt of electricity. He pulled out and snapped his hips forward, slamming inside him. Hannibal’s head tipped back with a grunt, exposing the long line of his neck. His fists twisted in the sheets.

“Yeah?” Will said. “God, I’m gonna fuck you so good.”

“*Yes*,” Hannibal hissed, lifting his knees higher, spreading himself wider.

Will grabbed onto his thighs, digging his nails in as he fucked him. Both of them were sweating - the storm hadn’t been enough to break the heat. The bed creaked; Will’s thrusts were fast and selfish and shallow. Occasionally he sank deep to rejoice in Hannibal’s tightness and to hear his answering groans. He felt a great force urging him on, making him merciless.

“God, Hannibal,” he panted. *“So good.”*

Hannibal didn’t reply, except in grunts and harsh, shallow breaths. His gaze held fast to Will’s face; he jerked himself with short pulls and when he started to come it was with a body-deep groan.

“*Fuck*,” Will said again, nudging his cock deeper, thrusting harder. He angled himself upright to watch: Hannibal’s fingers tight around his dick, strands of come sticking to them, the urgency and speed of his grip.

“Gonna-” Will groaned, and then he was pitching forward, his hands on Hannibal’s thighs, holding them in place. His discarded panties were wrapped tight around his knees, pulling at them like a restraint. His orgasm seemed to pulse on and on; Hannibal arched his back and reached for him, face shadowed with a loving intensity. When Will caught his breath, he slipped stickily free, flushed and aching; trembling all over.

With an effort he kicked off his underwear and crawled up the bed. Hannibal slid them both under the covers and they fell gratefully into sleep.

*

They woke soon, shortly after sunset. There was still light in the sky - Will blinked dazedly while taking in the array of pinks and oranges and yellows reflected on the clouds. But then he moved and became uncomfortably aware of their condition.

“Ugh,” he said, rubbing at his eyes. Old mascara crumbled away between his fingers. The rest of him felt just as gross.

Hannibal’s shoulder shook with a suppressed laugh; an arm curved round him. “Time for a shower, I think.”

They shared the bathroom, Hannibal washing Will’s hair and Will inspecting the scratches his nails had made on Hannibal’s thighs. There were red marks only; no blood had been drawn. Will made sure of that before he turned his attention elsewhere.

He stayed in the bathroom to scrub his face while Hannibal went to make something to eat. His makeup was half-gone, either dissolved in the rain or smeared across the pillow and Hannibal’s skin. Once his face was pink and clean, he roughly dried his hair and shoved it up out of the way - he’d regret it tomorrow, when it was an unmanageable tangle, but it would do for now. He was hungry and he felt changed. The Will who’d gone to the party had gone away and would return later. The Will who was here now was the one looking back at him from the mirror - uncomplicated and unadorned. He picked out a pair of cotton briefs and a plain t-shirt, and went downstairs.

More clouds had moved in and brought with them rain of a steady and more civilised type. It was spattering against the windows of the living room when Will came down the stairs, though the temperature was still high and the atmosphere muggy. There was no wind - aside from the rain, everything was still.

“Looks like there might more thunderstorms coming,” Will said, as he entered the kitchen.

Hannibal was there, sitting on a stool at the island counter. Before him was a glass of wine and preparations for dinner: a bowl of salad leaves, beaten eggs, and some kind of cheese sliced into tender fragments. Will greeted him with a brief kiss and took some cheese to nibble. It was a French one Hannibal had bought yesterday in yet another small town - Will didn’t know which kind it was.

“I’m starving,” he said. “All I’ve had for sustenance is a glass of champagne and a couple of canapes.”

Hannibal smirked and went to fire up a burner. “I saw that plate,” he said, reaching for an omelette pan. “There was more than a couple. I have no worries about you starving.”

But he nevertheless quickly served up a sustaining meal: a soft and oozing omelette and a bitter salad garnished with toasted hazelnuts. There was an apricot tart too, just warm out of the oven. It was fragrant with almonds and laced with a drizzle of cream.

“When did you make this?” Will asked.

“This morning,” Hannibal said. “When you were out stomping around the beach.”

Will laughed. “Was I that bad?”

“You needed some space before the party,” Hannibal said, “and you got it. Nothing wrong with that, especially when it gives me time in the kitchen.”

He smiled at Will, softly. Will felt the last tiny bit the day’s tension melt away. *Things are good here*, he thought. *We’re happy together.* He’d worried, just a little, about spending so much time alone with Hannibal. Though at home they saw each other nearly every day - except for Will’s regrettably intensive study periods - it wasn’t the same as living the same life. Will was going to miss it when it was over.

After dinner, Will curled up by Hannibal on one of the couches, feet snugly in his lap. The rain had strengthened but still had none of the force of earlier. A flicker of lightning could sometimes be seen, far out over the ocean. Usually, in the evenings, Hannibal played music but just then the only sound was rain striking the glass.

“Do you ever come here in winter?” Will asked, after another lightning flash had guttered and gone out. “It must be amazing to watch the storms roll in over the ocean.”

“It had never occurred to me,” Hannibal said. “Storm-watching alone seems like it would be a lonely thing.”

“But you wouldn’t have been alone all the time,” Will said. “You’ve had others.”

“Nobody like you,” Hannibal said. “Certainly nobody so interested in waves and water. Or in storms.”

Will fell silent, wanting to probe deeper but also wanting to stay exactly where he was, floating in the warm shallows of their evening. He thought of the letter and its instruction: *listen to the ocean*. Whatever Mrs Radcliffe had meant, he couldn’t imagine Hannibal taking her literally. It sounded too much like prayer and Hannibal preferred to rely on his own resources.

“We could come back in the winter,” Hannibal said. “Maybe for the holidays, once your parents have had their fair share of you.”

Will imagined it briefly - cold winds, salt spray, a huge snow-laden sky. A warm hearth and a warm bed. A warm heart.

“I’d like that,” he said. “Very much.”

*

The next day they took a drive up the coast to view some rental boats. Hannibal was keen to hire one just by themselves for a couple of days but Will was doubtful. He’d need a licence to take a boat out on his own and he already knew he didn’t have enough ocean sailing experience. But Hannibal insisted on taking a look anyway, only to find out it was exactly as Will had expected. They could hire a boat with a skipper but, though Hannibal did a good job of looking politely interested in the sales rep’s pitch, Will suspected it wasn’t exactly what he’d had in mind.

Instead of returning home immediately, Hannibal took the car inland and they drove through farmlands and woods. “We could still take a trip,” he said, as they passed a mansion hidden in the trees. “You could get more experience that way and you could fish too.”

“It might not be so bad having a skipper on board,” Will said. “I don’t know, I’d have to see the boat. Maybe just for the day?”

He was still thinking this over when something caught his eye. They’d emerged from the woods, straight into traffic waiting at a stoplight. On the other side of the street, partly hidden by shady trees, was a wedding chapel. It was small and tasteful, vaguely New England in style. A young woman in a simple white dress had just stepped out. She held someone’s arm, a man’s, but he was obscured by the trees. They paused together for an unseen photographer, her bare arm lying in his dark-suited one. She was smiling; laughing as if at a private joke. Her hair was dark and curly and her bouquet was of pale pink roses.

The light ahead changed and Hannibal drove on. Will frowned; the image of the woman remained imprinted on his mind like a negative and other pictures of his own imagining swiftly followed. He tried to shake them off but couldn’t - they were still there, clinging stubbornly on to his thoughts. Their existence worried at him; he didn’t know how to feel and that worried him too. It had all happened too fast, when his mind had been unguarded and at ease.

Hannibal noticed, of course. He noticed everything, it seemed, especially when Will didn’t want him to.

“She looked beautiful, don’t you think?” he commented.

Will pursed his lips in annoyance. He knew that was a deliberately leading statement and he also knew exactly where Hannibal was leading to. He decided to skip to the end rather than playing along.

“Looking beautiful isn’t what bothers me,” he said. “Or the dress, or what else to wear, or anything like that. It’s…”

“The happily ever after?” Hannibal offered.

Will gave him a sideways glance. Hannibal’s lips were curved in a smile, his forearms lean and nut brown from the sun. He was maddening; too handsome and too clever and smug about it as well. Will felt a hopeless stab of want; his mind ran ahead of him, treacherous, and showed him a future where it was Will’s bare arm laced through Hannibal’s suited one. Anything seemed possible on this vacation. It was dangerous.

“Maybe.” Will shrugged, hoping if he gave noncommittal answers Hannibal would withdraw.

But he didn’t. He was persistent, much more persistent than Will had been when he’d chosen not to quiz him about his romantic past.

“Fantasy or not, to live happily ever after is a common enough desire,” Hannibal said, sinking his claws deeper into the very subject Will wanted to avoid. “Without optimism, humanity would be in a much worse state than it is.”

Will gave him a dark look. He didn’t disagree, not exactly, but he felt provoked. “Doesn’t say much.”

Hannibal laughed; amused, light and easy. *Maddening,* Will thought again.

“Marriage is two people agreeing to believe in the same future,” Hannibal said. “Whether they are proved right or wrong to believe it is beside the point.”

Only then did he drop the subject. Will stayed quiet for the rest of the ride home, thinking about roses and sunlight and other things too dim and dark to see.

*

When they returned home, Will tried to clear his thoughts with a brisk walk. Out on the sands the sun was lowering and the sea shimmered with calm by his side. He’d explored the beach thoroughly by then and knew exactly where to go - northwards for half a mile, until the other beachfront houses dwindled away to nothing. There the beach was broad and flat and a small inlet trickled out over the sands, too small for swimming or boating. No one came here, except dog walkers and the occasional jogger.

He sat down to watch the shallow waves but his mind was not easily distracted, so he stood and ambled around the edge of the water once more, looking for pieces of sea glass. The few he found seemed dull and uninteresting and his focus slipped from even this simple task. He sighed and sat down again: it was no use. Whatever had been disturbed that afternoon wouldn’t settle on its own. The waters of his mind had been muddied and they needed time and encouragement to still again.

Hannibal had sensed his discomfort immediately - not only that but he’d known the cause. It wasn’t a fantasy Will had grown up with, that neat pairing off two-by-two - he’d known he was different for a long time, long before he’d noticed the little tubes of cherry lip balm at the drugstore counter and felt their pull. And he hadn’t particularly minded: he’d made friends easily and he’d had a free and fairly forgiving childhood. He had no complaints about his parents, either. On the whole they’d both been accepting and supportive; he’d only had one real disagreement with his mom, when he’d agreed to see a psychologist about his empathy disorder. He’d understood perfectly why she’d been upset - he could understand any point of view, if he tried hard enough. His imagination and his empathy worked perfectly together so that, if he wanted, no one need be a completely closed book.

But his imagination had been unable to conjure up anyone who could know him as well in return. Nor anyone he could be around for long periods without them pushing their way inside his head. Hannibal was an exception, an anomaly. Will had had no idea where it would lead when he’d first entered his waiting room, when he’d kissed him in his office. He still had no idea - try as he might, he couldn’t see where this road was leading him. How could he choose something he didn’t fully understand?

And yet here he was, sitting on a beautiful beach in a ridiculously expensive part of the country contemplating something unthinkable. Or what had been unthinkable until very recently. He recalled Hannibal’s earlier words about optimism, an agreement to believe in the same future. He’d been carefully probing, encouraging; a casual counterpoint to Will’s uneasiness. Now Will was more clear-headed he saw them for what they were: too casual. Underneath the light tone lurked something else, something corresponding to the dangerous feeling in Will’s own chest. It was likely that Hannibal didn’t know where this road lead either, but he was obviously eager to follow it.

He drew his knees up and angrily wrapped his arms around them. It was pure madness to even be thinking this way. He was young, he was happy - it would have been easier and simpler to just carry on as they were. But at his heart he knew that wasn’t possible - the strength of their feelings was growing all the time. With that came consequences; there were conversations to be had and things to be decided. Conversations which had to happen soon.

*

Will found Hannibal in his study, sketching in an easy chair. A book lay open by the harpsichord, the composition Hannibal had been working on temporarily halted.

Will hovered awkwardly, unsure how to begin. During the walk back he'd been full of decisiveness and certainty - he'd planned out their entire conversation. In it Will had explained, clearly, his mingled desire and reluctance, his complicated feelings. Hannibal had listened and said something comforting about Will's age, that it didn't matter and there was no hurry. That they had plenty of time. But now he was here, Will knew it wasn't going to happen that way.

Hannibal glanced up at him, expectant. But he soon looked down again and continued adding soft lines to his sketch.

He's been waiting for me, Will thought. *He knows why I left and why I came back. Why does he have to pretend like this?*

What came out of his mouth was a demand, not a question. "Tell me about the others," he said. "Have you brought anyone else here before?"

"No," Hannibal said. Will at least had his full attention now. He'd laid his pencil aside, frowning.

"I know plenty about you," Will said. "More than most."

"You see me better than anyone ever has or will," Hannibal said quietly. "But go on."

Will swallowed, and struggled back to his point. "There's lots I still don't know." He leaned back against the harpsichord and returned Hannibal's gaze evenly. "I saw you with the little girl at the party - you were good with her."

Hannibal's face stilled slightly; his eyes became a shade wary, more alert.

"Do you want children?" Will asked.

Hannibal blinked in surprise but he relaxed visibly. He rose from his chair and tried to make Will sit, but Will didn't want to - he was too restless. The window of opportunity for Hannibal to soothe him had passed, or perhaps it had never really been open. He twisted away, towards the desk.

"Maybe you already have one," Will went on, wildly. "Or more than one." He didn't really believe that but there was something clawing at him which needed to be voiced. An unexplainable anger, one he didn't fully understand yet.

Hannibal seated himself back in the easy chair, facing Will. "I don't have any children," he said. "And nor do I have much interest in having any."

Will chewed on a nail, thinking, absorbing. His agitation found an outlet in wandering round, looking at pictures on the wall, the books behind Hannibal's desk. Their spines were old cracked leather, hard and cold to the touch.

"Have you ever been married?" he said, turning suddenly to look at Hannibal.

Hannibal only shook his head.

“Ever wanted to?” Will persisted.

And then he knew he’d found it, the thing causing his anger. Hannibal’s other lovers - he could see them so clearly now. They would be elegant, beautifully dressed, witty - Hannibal would have adored them all, in his own way. And none of them had been anything like Will. He was out of place in Hannibal’s life and neither of them really knew what to do about it. Or about their feelings for each other.

The edges of Hannibal’s patience were starting to wear thin. He stared back at Will, something hard in his eyes.

“Not until recently,” he said. His voice carried an edge, a hint of warning.

Will looked away. He felt hot all over. He realised he’d known Hannibal would say that - it was why he’d asked the question in the first place.

Hannibal’s desk was before him, piled with loose sketches, and to distract himself he leafed through them. They were from their vacation and from before; all were of Will. In some he reclined in the sun, in others he was sleeping or reading or swimming. A few were purely imaginary, fantastical even, where Hannibal had inserted him into paintings, into mythology.

He felt a lump grow in his throat; the silence went on. Hannibal waited quietly, asking no questions and offering nothing further. Will slowly circled the room, hands in his pockets. He passed the shelves of books and reached the letter from Mrs Radcliffe. *Listen to the ocean*, Will thought. *What is the ocean telling us now?* If he listened hard, it could just be heard. The water was coming in fast and the far-away sound emphasised the heavy stillness in the room.

He drifted further round until he came up behind where Hannibal was sitting. Hannibal didn’t move but he followed Will from out of the corner of his eye. The skin of his neck above his collar looked vulnerable; his broad strong shoulders anything but. Will felt a yearning pull, a sudden riptide of love. He wanted to say sorry for his strange mood and his anger; to forgive Hannibal his past lovers, whomever they were. He wanted to surrender himself to the sea.

He placed a gentle hand on Hannibal’s shoulder and broke the spell. “Okay,” he said. “Yes.” As soon as he spoke, he understood what it meant.

So did Hannibal. He turned his head, keeping his expression guarded until he saw Will’s face. Then it became disbelieving, helplessly open. Will rushed to him; Hannibal leaned forward to rest his cheek against Will’s stomach. Neither of them spoke. Will looped his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders - they moved in time with his breath, regular and steady.

“I think…” Will said, and then stopped. He wiped his eyes: he was crying and hadn’t realised. “I think I’m optimistic,” he said, “when it comes to you and me. And it’s a good thing I am because it’s too late. We’re already… conjoined. I don’t know how it happened, but it did.”

Hannibal drew back and raised his face to Will’s. Will studied it; the lines around his eyes, the brutal curve of his cheekbones. His eyes were brimming with urgency. “I have something to give you,” he said, voice rough. “If you’d like it?”

Will nodded and let him stand. He watched as Hannibal fetched something from a drawer in the desk. It was a little gold ring - there wasn’t even a box. Hannibal folded it gently into Will’s palm;

he didn’t kneel though it clearly crossed his mind to do so. Instead he took his seat again and waited.

“A snake ring,” Will said. “An ouroboros.” It was made of plain brushed gold, formed as a delicately-modelled snake biting its tail. Its eyes were two tiny red stones.

“I hope you don’t think I was being presumptuous in bringing it with me,” Hannibal said. “I hadn’t seriously intended- It was to be a promise, I didn’t expect you to-”

“What were you going to promise?” Will asked.

“To love you,” Hannibal said. His voice had recovered - it was strong now, almost forceful. “As well as I can and for as long as I’m able.”

Will nodded, in agreement, and wiped his eyes again. “Put it on me?”

Hannibal took hold of his left hand, then paused, looking at Will for permission.

“Yes, yes,” Will said, impatiently. “Do it.”

Hannibal’s expression was raw but his hand was steady when he slid the ring onto Will’s finger.

Will stayed silent as he considered the little band of gold innocently circling his finger. It signified so much, all kinds of promises and meanings. It looked nothing like the other pieces of jewellery Hannibal had tempted him with before. It was nothing like them at all.

Outside the waves were louder, rising and falling with the beating of his own heart. Will bent to kiss and be kissed, to be pulled into Hannibal’s lap. And as he did he thought of strange currents and powerful tides; all he could do was ride them out and hope for safety.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, this is the ring

here is this fic on our tumblr and on twitter in case you'd like to share with your followers :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't want any fuss," Will said later that night.

They were talking in bed, with the remains of a hastily-gathered meal scattered around them. It was a rare thing for Hannibal to be surprised but still he could hardly believe what Will had done. There hadn't even been a real proposal - Will had simply held out his hand for the ring and Hannibal had rushed to comply. His power was astonishing - now an emblem of Hannibal's devotion encircled his finger, impatient for another to join it.

Hannibal allowed himself to look slightly crestfallen at Will's wish for simplicity. It was not unexpected, and a large wedding not necessary, but what about flowers, music, food?

"This vacation has been just perfect," Will said. "Just you and me. And this feels private still. I'd like to keep it that way - I don't want to share it with anyone else yet."

Hannibal considered that more fully and found that, right then, he agreed. But time would tell - once he'd pulled himself together he might feel differently. And so might Will. He had to tread carefully.

"We don't have to tell anyone anything for now," he said. "We can decide what to do later, once we're back home."

Will jerked his head up. "Wait, what?" he said. "When we get home? I thought we were gonna, you know - do it sooner than that."

Hannibal's shock was swift and entirely genuine. "Sooner?" he said. "You mean here? Now?"

"Yeah," Will said. "Like I said, I don't want to share it with anyone yet. If we go home, we can't keep it from people. I mean, I can't not tell Bev. And then the longer we wait, the more of a huge thing it'll become. I'd rather do it now."

The idea was tempting; it was full of risk but how sweet it would be to return home married and facing the future as one. There were difficulties, of course, and not just the issues Will was aware of. Hannibal would have had Will to live with him months ago had not that been the case.

"So secrecy will be a permissible sin?" Hannibal said. "Which will allow us to marry in the manner you prefer."

"Not permissible," Will said. "Forgivable, maybe." For the first time a shadow crossed his face.

Hannibal nodded slowly. "Will…" he said, after a pause. "I have to ask: are you quite sure? There's a reason engagements last for some time. I'd sooner keep you and remain unwed than rush the matter too quickly."

"And yet still fifty percent of marriages end in divorce." Will sat cross-legged in front of Hannibal; his expression was clear and calm. "I'm as sure as you are. I can see it in your eyes."

Hannibal didn't answer that. He couldn't deny it and he didn't want to. Every atom of him ached for Will; he wanted them fused together as fast and as permanently as possible. Marriage would simply be a good, solid start.

"When I saw that woman standing outside the chapel," Will said, "it was partly like I was seeing myself in the past. As if it had already happened and I just didn't realise it until then. You're right - we don't *have* to get married but we have to decide how it's going to be between us soon. Because something in me has joined up with something in you, and-"

"Yes," Hannibal said. "My answer is yes. Always yes."

He reached out for Will and he came, settling into Hannibal's lap with a smile. It seemed like he'd always belonged there; like he might never leave.

Hannibal heaved a great sigh, wrapped in the scent of Will's hair and the sensation of falling, down into a deep dark abyss. Will might pose a problem, but it was a problem Hannibal very much wanted to have.

*

Research began in earnest the next morning. By the time Will had eaten breakfast, Hannibal had found the marriage licence forms and made an appointment with the town clerk. They filled out the paperwork together over coffee - it was surprisingly quick and simple.

"I thought they might've thrown a few extra hurdles in," Will said. "One sheet of paper and that's it. They didn't even quiz me about my gender. What are official forms for if not policing identity?"

"You sound disappointed," Hannibal said, eyes smirking brightly over his coffee cup.

"I'm depressingly used to it," Will said. "And, I don't know, shouldn't this be more grown-up and bureaucratic? Applying to college was fifty times harder."

"Ah, but we must stand in front of a representative of the government," Hannibal said, "and have them watch as we sign our names on the dotted line."

"I hope at least they're going to ask if either of us is being coerced," Will said. "I'd enjoy that. I wonder what they'd do if I said yes?"

Hannibal laughed. He looked so happy, elbows on the table, leaning across it to be closer to Will. His attention never left him; Will was bathed in it like light.

After breakfast was tidied away, they took on the most onerous task - where to get married and by whom. Most places had been booked for months and the time they had was very short indeed - once it was signed the licence would be valid exactly twenty four hours later, which left only two and a half days until the end of their vacation.

"I don't really care where we do it," Will said, after some time of fruitless searching. "Anywhere that's available."

Hannibal, of course, cared very much. Will caught him looking longingly at a place with grand ballrooms and lush gardens overlooking the beach. Elegant cakes and flower arrangements featured prominently in the photos.

“Look,” Will said, folding his arms. “Maybe later on we could do something like that, a reception of some sort. Not with hundreds of people but some. A few. You know, friends and family.”

Hannibal gave him a skeptical look and shut the browser tab.

“I know,” Will said. “But believe it or not, I’d do it for you. So you can go nuts on the cake and the flowers and the catering and all that stuff later. But right now, let’s not waste time?”

“You’re right,” Hannibal sighed. “Of course you are.”

“You’re just really not sure if you can bear to stand in line at the courthouse,” Will said with a smile.

“Even that’s booked solid,” Hannibal said. “I called after I made the appointment for the licence.”

Will’s face fell. “Oh shit, really? I thought we’d end up there if nowhere else was free.”

“We still have more places to check,” Hannibal said. “We need only a small room and an officiant - I’m sure it could be managed.”

And it was. Will went to make more coffee and when he returned, Hannibal was ending a call, glimmering with self-satisfaction.

“Well?” Will said, spilling coffee across the table in his haste.

“It’s done,” Hannibal said. “Wednesday at noon.”

“Where?” Will said, urgently. *“How?”*

“I leaned heavily on their sympathies,” Hannibal said. “If anyone asks, we had been booked into the Stryker Estate Vineyard, where the owners have unfortunately just filed for bankruptcy. We are planning to postpone the reception and hold it later at another venue, but we particularly wanted to get married on Wednesday as it is our anniversary. Otherwise we’d have to wait a whole year to try again.”

He showed his iPad to Will. It was full of pictures of a grand and very beautiful house, set in rolling country, with the ocean in the distance. The rooms had crystal chandeliers, there was a stone terrace where guests mingled joyfully, clutching champagne flutes and laughing. *Dedicated wedding planner,* the website said. *We can accommodate up to a thousand guests.*

Will threw a glance at Hannibal. *How* had he managed this?

“They have another wedding booked in the early evening,” Hannibal said, “but they agreed we could have a small room for the ceremony if we finish by two. They will take care of everything - I’ve asked for some very simple decorations, a photographer, and a bottle of their very best champagne. But that’s all.”

Will listened, still scrolling through the website. “And also you paid an enormous sum, I imagine?”

Hannibal didn’t answer. He crossed his legs and took a sip of coffee, looking extremely pleased with himself.

A smile broke out on Will's face. He looked at Hannibal. "It's going to happen," he said. "The day after tomorrow."

Hannibal put his coffee down and took up Will's hand instead. His finger gently caressed the snake ring. "Yes," he said. "It is. The day after tomorrow."

*

The morning of the wedding arrived quickly. The licence had been picked up the day before with very little ceremony and they'd chosen two matching gold rings from a jeweller in Southampton. Will's was a little big but as there was no time to have it resized it would have to done afterwards. Will didn't mind. Where other people might feel a sudden superstition about ring which wasn't a perfect fit, he only had a calm sense of rightness. Their wedding was hastily organised and, to his mind, all the more special for it. It was natural that a few things would fall short of ideal and, as long as it was only the size of a ring, he was fine with that.

He felt no nerves at all, even when getting dressed. He'd taken one of the other bedrooms to get ready in and sat in front of the dresser with the clutter of his makeup bag spread out on its glossy surface. His clothes were hanging in the closet, freshly pressed: loose tapered pants in dark plum, and a softly-structured shirt which was almost a blouse. There was a necklace, too - a fine gold chain threaded through a tiny garnet pendant. Will looked in the mirror and decided upon his makeup. Very minimal, just a darkening of the lashes and a little gloss. When he looked at the pictures in years to come he wanted to see himself as he was most often - neither male nor female but somewhere happily in between.

He was just buttoning the shirt when the doorbell rang downstairs. A few moments later, he heard Hannibal's soft knock at the door. Will went to open it, smiling. Hannibal was fully dressed and looking more formal than Will had seen him in days. He wore a cream suit with a thin burgundy pinstripe and a burgundy shirt and tie. In his hands were roses.

"I wasn't sure which you would prefer," Hannibal said. He set the bundle down on the dresser. Will saw there was a small posy of blush-coloured roses and two separate single-stems, trimmed as buttonholes. Hannibal took up one of the buttonholes and fastened it fastidiously onto his jacket, leaving the posy and a buttonhole behind. "Take your pick."

Will's hand hovered over the posy. The roses were a perfect match for the bunch Hannibal had sent him soon after they'd first met. There'd been so many that, with Bev's help, he'd scattered them all over the house in little jars and cups. He couldn't help thinking that she should be here with him now, providing wisecracks and whisky and helping him get ready. *She can still do that,* he told himself. *Later, when we have the fancy reception Hannibal wants.* But he felt guilty all the same.

He picked up the posy and looked at himself in the mirror again. There were bright spots of colour on his cheeks; his smile was soft and a little sad.

"I'll take this," he said. "If I keep it in water, I'll be able to show Bev when I get home." The remaining buttonhole lay alone on the dresser. "Though it's shame to leave this. Maybe…?"

He unwound the thread securing the stem and rummaged through his makeup bag for a bobby pin. By fixing the rose into the pin, he could wear it in his hair.

"Remember this?" he said, glancing at Hannibal in the mirror.

“Of course,” Hannibal said, and then quoted himself, a year past: “It’s almost not fair to the flower.”

Will snorted. “You smooth old devil,” he said. “If I’d been at all unsure about marrying you today, that probably would’ve done the trick.”

*

The drive to venue was hushed and full of expectancy. Will kept looking at his hands, imagining the ring he’d soon be wearing. He hadn’t got used to seeing the ouroboros on his left hand yet - would it be much different to see a wedding ring there as well? Beside him, Hannibal glowed, quietly happy. He’d been like that for the past couple of days, especially in public. Almost as if he’d been daring someone to ask why.

When they arrived, the staff were ready and waiting for them. The woman Hannibal had spoken to on the phone greeted them at the door and led them through a series of halls and corridors to the room they’d hired for the ceremony. Will looked around, taking in the white-painted panelling and the crystal chandelier, while Hannibal spoke to her about the arrangements. The room was big enough to comfortably seat fifty - a few rows of chairs had been set out, white and elegantly simple. Will imagined them full of people and wondered if that would be better or worse than the heavy silence that the room was draped in.

Now he was here, he found his voice had become lost in his throat. It seemed like he was suffering from nerves after all. He moved away from the woman, away from the empty chairs, to stand at a window, looking out through the glass at the sun-filled lawns and breeze-ruffled foliage. There was a sound of roaring in his ears; blood crashing like waves on a beach.

But Hannibal was soon at his elbow, and then was leading him to a seat, as the woman’s footsteps echoed away and out of the room.

“Feeling okay?” Hannibal said.

“Yeah,” said Will. He leaned his elbows on his knees and took a few deep breaths. “I just- I mean, this place is *a lot*, isn’t it? Somehow it’s easier to imagine what it’s like in full swing when it’s all quiet and empty like this.”

“Ghosts of weddings past and weddings yet to come?”

“Something like that,” Will said. He turned round and looked out across the lines of empty chairs. “Do you think we could get these taken away?” he said. “There’s something about them… They seem to be manifesting an absence of people.”

Hannibal frowned deeply. “Are you quite sure-”

Will cut him off. “Yes, I’m quite sure. I guess I feel a bit guilty about doing this in secret but we’re going to make it up to everyone, aren’t we? With a reception or something?”

Hannibal nodded slowly, still frowning. “You might be sure about getting married but are you sure you want to do it like this?” he said. “Whatever might happen in the future, I want you to remember this day with unclouded thoughts. With no regrets.”

Will took a steadying breath. People were coming into the room now, lighting the candles which lined the aisle and arranging fresh flowers around their bases. Roses, exactly the same kind as his posy. The air seemed less heavy; the scent of candle wax and flowers warmed the chilly floor polish smell of the room. A beam of sunlight pierced one of the tall windows; light pooled onto the floor and rose up with thousands of tiny dust motes.

Hannibal's arm was around him, warm and comforting; it was everything Will wanted.

"I'm sure," Will said. "No regrets."

The people drifted away, taking their noise and bustling energy with them. The room's character now seemed to come from another place, one more like a church - an old one, silent and dreaming. Then music started - soft strings, punctuated by a faint crackle and hiss. A record player had appeared in an unobtrusive corner.

Will watched the lazy bumping spin of the record before turning to Hannibal, eyebrow raised.

"There was no time to hire musicians," Hannibal said innocently. "And this will be less intrusive anyway."

"What happened to 'simple decorations, a photographer, and a bottle of champagne'?"

"The very best champagne," Hannibal corrected. "A room requires atmosphere. Don't you agree?"

Will looked around again. The quiet music of Hannibal's ghostly string quartet fell into the room like soft rain. Something had settled, or maybe changed. The chairs no longer looked accusing - their emptiness seemed only poignant.

"Leave the chairs," he said and smiled, meeting Hannibal's eyes. "They're fine. Everything's fine."

Hannibal beamed back at him and took his hand.

The ceremony itself, straightforward and unembellished, took no time at all. The officiant was kindly but efficient, which Will was grateful for afterwards. It was only when he tried to walk back down the aisle that he realised how wobbly his legs had become. He held onto Hannibal's arm and let himself be led out into the garden for the photos. An arbour stood in a sunny corner, adorned with a froth of exuberant climbing roses. Will stood obediently underneath them, dazed, happy, oblivious to everything but Hannibal. His heart embraced a steady drumbeat of exhilaration and his mind was unclouded.

*

A cold lunch waited for them when they arrived back. After the excitement of the day, Will was aware of his hunger but sitting down to a polite meal was the last thing he could imagine doing. Hannibal, with a lingering look at Will, let go of his hand and moved towards the fridge to begin plating.

Will watched dumbly - he only saw Hannibal's long stride away from him, the shift of material over his back as he reached an arm out for the refrigerator door, before a split second decision was upon him. Rushing forward, he caught Hannibal around the shoulders and shoved him against the wall. His hands scrabbled to tear open his shirt and his mouth crushed to Hannibal's.

Hannibal's chest heaved once with surprise; his lips parted under Will's and his growling laugh erupted into Will's mouth. The movement of Will's hands was arrested; Hannibal had seized his wrists, grip tight and unforgiving, to twist Will round, pushing and crowding, until his back hit the wall with a jolt.

Will stared at him, deep into his eyes. They were calm, mirthful, intense. Hannibal smiled softly, and wet his lips.

Will pushed absently against Hannibal's grip and only then realised he was pinned against the wall. "Fuck," he said, and struggled more urgently. He tried to buck his hips against him, arousal building, seeking the press of Hannibal's body, but Hannibal kept tantalisingly out of reach. Will stopped, and tossed his hair out of his face. "Fuck me," he said, his tone demanding.

Hannibal leaned in, brushing his lips lightly over Will's, keeping his head tilted as if he were scenting the air. Then he let go of Will's wrists, hooked his hands under his thighs, and lifted. Will leapt up eagerly, wrapping his legs around him, pressing as tight and close as he could. His hands were in Hannibal's hair, sliding and pulling, and then on his neck, his jaw. Hannibal's tongue tasted of clean, sweet minerals; like stainless steel used to cut soft ripe fruit. Will sucked on it, welcoming the intrusion, wanting more. Hannibal shifted underneath him; Will felt the cold press of the wall against his back again and used it to urge himself closer. His dick throbbed in his pants; every so often the ridge of Hannibal's side grazed its tip and made him gasp. Hannibal leaned his weight onto him, enfolding Will between himself and the wall. His breath was coming fast, his hips pushed forward, seeking an elusive friction.

Slowly, Hannibal's hold relaxed and Will slipped free to grind himself on Hannibal's hip instead. Hannibal growled and pushed his face into Will's neck, bunching the fabric of Will's blouse in his hands and pulling it loose. Will groaned and tipped his head back. His fingers tightened in Hannibal's hair; the fingers of the other found his zipper and yanked it down. Hannibal followed his lead. They brought their cocks together, a blunt rush of sensation, too abrasive to be truly enjoyed. Hannibal spat into his hand and coated them, coaxing pre-come from them both, so that all they need do was thrust against the other, panting harshly into each other's mouths, until they came. The sound Hannibal uttered was soft, hoarse. He rested his forehead to Will's, eyes closed and still under their lids.

Will unclenched his fingers from Hannibal's sleeves - they were stiff and his hands hurt from the effort of holding on - and became aware that his stomach was wet and sticky. Hannibal stirred; he moved slowly, like someone intoxicated. He fetched a damp kitchen cloth and knelt, wiping at Will's stomach, and between pauses kissing him there. Then he undressed Will, starting with his shoes and ending with his crumpled blouse. Will did the same for him and together they walked out naked onto the terrace.

There they stayed, until the sun hung low in the sky. It was hot and the air was still; they sheltered under an umbrella, kissing and touching, barely speaking. Will chased the sparkling reflections of pool water over Hannibal's skin, tasting brine and musk and iron. The light weakened gradually, becoming cooler, a pastel yellow wash. Will was sleepy when he said: "You didn't fuck me."

Hannibal kissed him, apologetic. He fetched blankets and proper lubrication and Will got his wish, Hannibal's weight on top of him, as the first stars began glimmering in the violet sky. Will came loudly, his moans drawn-out and effusive; Hannibal's name carried high into the deepening night.

They both slept a little and then made a feast outside, beginning with the cold food which should've been lunch. It was opulent, and somewhat messy, with oysters and caviar, and little filo shells filled with heart tartare. Much later, and still hungry, they cooked together, Hannibal showing Will how to make the sauce for the snails while he roasted the lamb.

Now they'd both recovered from their emotions and exertions, an undercurrent of something like triumph bubbled through the kitchen. Will examined this, while Hannibal fed him snails warm from the pan. When their eyes met, he knew what it was - a shared euphoria, a feeling of knowing they'd both gotten away with something they shouldn't have been allowed to do.

*

The stars were thick overhead that night. Will lay on his back on a sun lounger, gazing upwards, lulled by the gentle splash of Hannibal in the pool. He would swim a lap and then pause, treading water, to talk to Will.

Next time he stopped, Will asked him, "Where would you have liked to have got married? If it could've been anywhere - no restrictions of time and space?"

There was a deeper, sustained rush of water, accompanied by a dripping sound. Will sat up. Hannibal had lifted himself out of the pool; he was sitting on the edge with a black shadow of water staining the flagstones around him.

"The Norman chapel in Palermo," he said, almost instantly.

Will stayed silent, waiting for details and watching the shadow of water spread.

"I visited it as a young man," Hannibal said. "I found it severe and beautiful and timeless, with a single reminder of mortality: a skull graven in the floor. It made a great impression on me."

"Obviously," Will said. "I want to see it. Can I?" He reached for Hannibal's iPad, abandoned earlier when Hannibal had tired of reading.

Hannibal nodded. He slipped back into the pool and waited, arms resting on the edge, while Will looked up the chapel.

"We haven't talked about a honeymoon yet," he said. "Perhaps you should see it in real life."

Will didn't answer, too caught up with his thoughts. On the screen was a picture of the chapel in candlelight, its great stone arches soaring overhead, brilliant with gold. The skull Hannibal had mentioned looked up from the floor, imploring. Will stepped over it and, taking Hannibal's arm, they began their slow walk down the aisle. The altar drew nearer, and the scent of incense and candle wax mingled with that of roses.

"Perhaps I should," Will said, flicking the iPad's screen to blackness. "One day."

Hannibal was still waiting, hair wet and slick, skin beaded with water. Strange shadows flickered in the depths, beneath the pool lights.

Will slid into the dark water and went to join him.

Chapter End Notes

Boy, did I spend some time looking for the right wedding venue in the Hamptons or what? In short, there aren't any wedding chapels *or* courthouses there, and you also need a birth certificate to get a marriage licence. Which is good, because then no one can make the same dumb spur-of-the-moment decision Will just did *sigh*

Thank you for all your lovely comments - I love hearing from you!! <3

If you enjoyed and want to share with your followers, here is this fic on my twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Posting this chapter early as I have visitors this weekend - hope you all enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will crouched shivering in Hannibal's foyer amid the wreckage of their arrival. The weather had turned not long after Wilmington; grey skies and rain had chased in, changing summer into an early chilly fall in minutes. Somewhere, in one of his bags, was a good, large sweater - only he couldn't find it.

"I don't remember taking so much stuff," Will said, as Hannibal brought in the last suitcase. It was his own, which meant Will had run out of places to look. "Did you happen to pack a sweater of mine?" he asked. "I hope so, otherwise I've left it behind."

Hannibal cleared his throat. "I understand we haven't discussed it yet, and that nothing we discuss can happen immediately. But, if possible, I'd like for you to consider this your home." He remained standing meaningfully by the open front door, at the threshold of the house.

Will cast it a glance and looked back at Hannibal. Slowly, he raised his eyebrows.

Hannibal watched his reaction. "Not that I mean to imply anything about the role you occupy in our marriage," he said. "In fact, that's something else we should talk about."

Will stood, and in doing so spied the missing sweater poking out of an open gym bag. He pulled it on gratefully and considered what Hannibal was suggesting. The crossing of the threshold; the bride entering her new domain. "Does it still count if I've already walked inside under my own steam?"

Hannibal smiled and shrugged. "We can make our own rules," he said. "As long as we agree to believe in the same ones."

"Sure you can carry me?" Will said, weaving a path through the strewn luggage towards Hannibal.

"Bridal style?" Hannibal smirked. "Watch me."

Will raised his arms with a laugh and let Hannibal lift him. He wove his arms lightly around Hannibal's neck, watching his face for signs of strain, but there were none. Hannibal picked his way carefully through the maze of bags and took Will into the house, gently depositing him on a couch in the living room.

"Have to admit, I'm impressed," Will said. "And also quite glad I wasn't called upon to carry you."

Hannibal smiled and kissed him on the forehead. Then he went to shut the front door, leaving Will to look around the living room with new eyes. *I'd like for you to consider this your home*, Hannibal had said. That was certainly new.

“Home is an interesting concept for me,” he said, when Hannibal returned. Will moved up to make room for him on the couch. “I had two, you see, when I was growing up. My dad’s house and my mom’s trailer. I was supposed to live with my dad when he wasn’t away working but in reality I just moved between them. If dad annoyed me, I’d go stay with mom. And vice versa.”

“And then you had three,” Hannibal said. “You have a home with Bev as well.”

“Well, I’d say four, actually,” Will said. “I guess I already think of this place as one too. Just not, you know, *actually mine*.”

Hannibal settled closer against him. There were a couple of strands of hair falling across his forehead. Will brushed them away.

“Growing up our homes are - or should be - a safe haven,” Hannibal said. “But we’re always aware we must leave them for somewhere different. A place where we remake ourselves. A place to fulfil our potential.”

“Leaving them fixed forever in the mind,” Will said, thinking of the smell of fried fish at a Formica-topped table. “In a tableaux of memory.”

“It seems especially so once you reach my age,” Hannibal said. “Your childhood is still very close; it is not quite done with you yet. The threads will still cling.”

“I think I’m done with it,” Will said. “I’m ready for my future. I have a year left of college, then maybe an internship, teaching, more study. I can specialise, I can do anything I want. And you.” He looked at Hannibal and smiled. “And there’s always you.”

Hannibal touched Will’s cheek, a soft smile on his face.

“I know we should’ve talked about all this already,” Will said. “What to call each other, what happens now. I know that and yet I’m still not sorry about it.”

“We’ll work it out,” Hannibal said. “There’s no hurry. If we decide on the details after the wedding instead of before, at least we have no deadline.”

“I did sort of figure I’d come live here,” Will said, a little guiltily. “Is it wrong that I assumed that? I mean, you moving in with me and Bev would be the only other option.”

“There are many options,” Hannibal said. “We could live anywhere in the world, should we decide to.”

“I think I’ll stick with here for now,” Will said, smiling. “That kind of limitless possibility is something I’m going to have to get used to.”

Hannibal laughed a little. “One step at a time, then.”

Will felt a sudden unease. “The first step is tell Bev,” he said. “I can’t just move out on her - we have the place for another year.”

“Will she be able to find another roommate?”

“I expect so,” Will said. “But it’s not just that. She’ll need time to get used to the idea and so will I.”

Hannibal's kiss was comforting, reassuring. "Like I said, there's no rush."

Will nodded, and kept his sigh silent, directed inwards. He wanted to live with Hannibal, very much, but it made him sad to think of leaving Bev. It was going to be a major adjustment.

Hannibal changed the subject. "How would you like me to refer to you in conversation with others?" he asked. "I always used your name and let people draw their own conclusions about our relationship, but now we're married something more definite is called for. Partner seems a good choice - or perhaps you'd prefer something else?"

For the past couple of days, Will had been occupied with exactly the same topic. "I've been trying to think of you as my husband but I don't think I'm quite there yet," he said, and then grinned. "It feels like a dirty word, somehow. Like I don't have the right to call you that."

"I see," Hannibal said, bending his head to kiss Will's neck. His hands settled low on Will's hips. "We should get some mileage out of that before it becomes too commonplace."

Will laughed. "Partner is fine," he said. "I don't mind husband either, actually. Wife feels particularly loaded, though - all that duty and womanhood."

"I will stick with partner," Hannibal said, in between kisses. His mouth was hot and lush against Will's neck. "We can try out the others in private if you'd like, see if we can invent our own definitions."

Will, wriggling free of Hannibal's attentions, slid astride his lap. "If I'm any sort of wife," he said, "I know I'm the bad kind."

Hannibal's laugh was delightful to Will; his smile sharp with perception. Will kissed him properly, deeply, and knew himself loved.

*

Will arrived home early in the evening and trudged up to his room, dragging several heavy bags with him. The amount of laundry he'd brought back was truly frightening. He dumped the bags on the floor and lay moodily on his bed, ruminating on how cruel it was that a vacation should end with a mountain of things to wash. He'd do it later, he decided, once he was feeling less sorry for himself.

He'd parted from Hannibal reluctantly; both of them had felt it keenly, after spending so many days together. It hurt, now; there was a pain in Will's gut, a raw pain, like a small part of him had been cut away. He curled onto his side and felt the ghostly contact where Hannibal's touch would be if he were lying behind Will - a forearm pressed low across his belly, his chest where it met Will's shoulders, warm lips and breath just behind his ear. If he shut his eyes and concentrated Will could almost make it real.

But it wasn't. And, he told himself as he sat up, Hannibal wasn't far away. Only a text message away, in fact. He'd see him again and very soon. More to the point, once he'd spoken to Bev and made arrangements for giving up his room, he'd see him every morning and every night for forever. So the first thing to do was to stop being so dramatic and start the laundry.

He arranged himself in the middle of his bags on the floor and began unpacking. Clothes to be washed were flung into separate piles by the door; his wash bag and makeup he threw onto his bed

to be put away later. A handful of dogeared novels followed the wash bag, as did his phone charger, hairdryer and razor. Bev's gift needed more careful handling. Will unwrapped its tissue paper; its ugly blank frog-face peeped out, all grinning teeth. It had survived the journey intact - he put it to one side, toying with the idea of tying a ribbon around its neck before giving it to Bev. Maybe he'd leave it in her room for her to find, reclining on her bed.

Inside an open holdall, nestled into a pile of dirty laundry, was his wedding posy, tied into a little bag of water. Will lifted it out and held it in his hands, turning it this way and that. It was still as perfect as the day Hannibal had presented it to him, its petals supple and the leaves green and fresh. It was heady with scent, too; Will brought it to his face, thinking, remembering. After he'd shown Bev he planned to dry it.

Would she understand? Doubt clutched hold of him - he wasn't sure.

He looked at the fingers of his left hand. The coiled snake drew his attention first, its little red eyes softly glittering. Months ago, Hannibal had told him his family crest had featured a snake. He'd showed Will a picture, a sketch done from memory, of a huge and sinuous snake devouring a man. It must be Will's crest now too, though Hannibal didn't use it, and neither did he use his title. Will had half-expected his aristocratic origins to be common knowledge among Baltimore society but in reality they knew little of consequence about him. Any curiosity they had Hannibal skillfully kept at bay - they remained just curious enough to find him amusing, but not curious enough to pry.

Hannibal kept his past carefully shrouded in darkness. Will imagined it like a rarely-used room, clothed in dust-sheets and silence. He didn't need Hannibal to tell him about it - he could piece much of it together from the shapes hulking under the sheets. His past was a complicated place, especially his earliest years - the lost family estate, the accident which killed his family, the orphanage before his uncle brought him to Paris. Will understood enough of Hannibal now to make the kinds of leaps others would never suspect of truth. His obsession with food, for instance; no one thumbed their nose at hunger quite as flagrantly as Hannibal did. Will had grown up poor, but not quite so poor as that.

Nestled beside the snake ring was a plain gold band: his wedding ring, still a little loose. The sight of it on his finger remained shocking, nearly illicit. Except for the two of them, no one else knew of its existence.

Will's eyes closed; he felt again Hannibal's light grasp of his palm and the cold slide of metal over his finger. He thought of the ring's companion, worn by Hannibal at that exact moment, and smiled. *Somewhere,* he thought, *they would always be stood side-by-side in the soft sighing dark. Illuminated by candlelight reflected from a gleaming gold-leaf ceiling, watched by a skull inlaid into the mosaic floor.*

*

He was on the second load of laundry when Bev arrived back. Will heard the slam-thud of the front door being kicked properly shut and the jangle of her keys.

"You home?" she called into the house.

Will called back from the bottom of the basement stairs. "Down here, just doing some laundry. I'll be up in a sec."

He crumpled the shirt he was folding back into the basket - it was time to face the music.

Bev was in the kitchen making coffee. On the table was a box of sticky doughnuts and the pizza flyer which normally lived on the fridge. Will smiled - a night in with pizza, dumb movies, and Bev was about the only thing which could distract him from missing Hannibal.

He flung his arms round her, making her jump. He'd missed her - she was his best friend, his first ever. She'd just shown up in his life one day, cool and clever and utterly unimpressed by any of his peculiarities, and he'd loved her for it immediately. A shared and gleefully ghoulish interest in real life murders had cemented it. They watched horror movies together and quizzed each other on inaccuracies; they made up a fake cop-show future for themselves, where they teamed up to hunt serial killers armed only with lipgloss and sarcasm. No one else was so practical and well-balanced; no one else so fun and warm-hearted.

She turned round and punched him hard in the shoulder, then hugged him back tightly. Will closed his eyes in pain; he felt like he'd betrayed her. In his heart he knew he should have told her before marrying Hannibal. Even a phone call would've been better than this.

Bev pulled back, smile huge and wide. It faded quickly when she saw Will's face.

"What?" she said, instantly on guard. "Something's wrong - what is it?"

Will took a seat at the kitchen table, carefully concealing his left hand in his lap. He rubbed his face with the other. "Nothing's wrong," he said. She relaxed a little, bringing the coffee over and sitting down opposite him. "We had a great time. But I do have something important to tell you."

There was a short pause, a silent inhalation. Bev sipped her coffee and leaned in, listening, a faint frown between her brows.

"We got married," Will said.

Bev's mouth opened wide in shock. She went very still and for a moment said nothing at all. Will bit his lip and waited.

"You're kidding, right?" she said, disbelief etched across her face."You mean you had one of those pretend wedding ceremonies on the beach where you read a poem and put flower garlands on each other?"

Will didn't answer. In a flurry of movement, she pushed her cup aside and gestured across the table with both hands, imploring.

"Come on, Will. That has to be it. *Right?*"

Will pulled his left hand up off his lap and set it on the table in full view. Her eyes drifted down to it, widening when she saw his ring finger.

"Oh fuck," she said, and pressed her hands to her mouth. "You really did it? Shit."

"I know it's sudden," Will said. "We didn't plan it - it just sort of happened."

"What the fuck? Will!" she said. "Getting married isn't something that *just happens*. There's planning needed - venues, the ceremony, *a marriage licence*."

"We did all that," Will said. "It only took a couple of days."

Bev hunched over the table, face in her palms. “Sorry,” she said, after another pause and a deep breath. “I’m just struggling here. You mean none of this was planned in advance? You guys didn’t go out there intending to get hitched on the quiet?”

Will shook his head mutely.

“Right,” she said, and fell silent again. Will let her think without interruption. Her worry for him was piled on top of the confusion that Will had chosen not to confide in her beforehand; both were unbearably palpable to him.

“I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you,” Will said. “I missed you a lot, you know - especially just before the ceremony. But it felt right to do it all then, with only the two of us. It’s hard to explain - you just have to trust me on that.”

Her face when he said ‘the ceremony’ was hard to look at, but Will made himself do it. It was just punishment.

“We’re going to have a bigger thing later, to invite people to,” he said. “Like a second wedding, I guess. There’s no way Hannibal is going to be happy until he’s ordered an ostentatious cake and an outfit to match.”

Bev’s smile was weak but at least it signalled she was trying.

“Start from the beginning,” she said. “How did it happen exactly? Were you thinking about it before? Had you talked about it?”

“Not really,” Will said. “But things have been serious between us for a while and I thought it might happen, eventually. In the future.”

“So why now?” She took a breath, and reached for the comfort of her coffee again. “Did Hannibal propose or…?”

Will gave a nervous, creaky laugh. “No, I think I did.” He sat up straighter, absently pulling the box of doughnuts nearer. “Um, we passed by a wedding party coming out of a chapel and it sort of led to us getting engaged. At the time Hannibal was thinking we’d get married further down the line, here in Baltimore, but I didn’t want to wait.”

She frowned and looked away, lips pursed in thought. After a while she said, “And you’re sure about it?”

“Yes,” Will said, hating how his answer sounded a performative note. Bev’s doubt was beginning to affect him - the more she needed reassurance, the less convincing his responses were. “I didn’t want to wait because I didn’t want a fuss. It was just me and him; it was nice. Romantic, I guess.”

Bev sucked in a breath and let it out through her teeth. Her posture had softened a little; she was nodding. “Did you tell *anyone?* Your parents?”

Will felt queasy with guilt then. “No,” he said. “There wasn’t much time and it’s not like they could’ve been there.” He sighed, knowing how feeble that sounded. “Like I said, we’ll have a proper wedding thing here, later.”

Bev's frown hadn't entirely disappeared. But she shook herself, pulling her face into a smile, and gave an elaborate, exaggerated shrug.

"Well, I guess it's done," she said. "I mean, I still think you're crazy. Both of you. I thought Hannibal would've insisted on being more traditional about it - my parents would literally murder me and bury me under the garage if I married someone they hadn't even met."

"You mean you thought Hannibal would've been more sensible," Will said. "It's okay, you can say it."

"Yeah, maybe I did mean that," she admitted. "It's risky, Will. You haven't even lived together."

"It's riskier for Hannibal," said Will. "He's the one with all the money."

"Well, when you eventually divorce him I'll help you take him to the cleaners." She gave him a grin, a proper one, and Will felt his heart lighten a little - if they were joking, they were over the worst.

"Ha ha," he said flatly. "Do I get a doughnut yet or are you still mad at me?"

"Hmmmn," she said, peering into the box. "I dunno, maybe. I get first dibs though."

She picked out a squashy custardy one and slid the box back over to Will. Will gave her a small smile. They ate in companionable silence for a few moments, before Bev spoke again.

"I'm not mad at you, Will. I just… worry."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry for making you worry. I know this is a lot to get your head around."

"So what happens now?"

Will licked his fingers and took a swallow of coffee. "Nothing's going to change for a while yet," he said. "Hannibal understands that I can't just run out on you and that I don't want to either. I do want to live with him and I will, but we've got a lot to sort out before then."

"Okay," she said, nodding. "Good. I mean, it's a bit weird having the engagement part after the wedding, but better late than never, I guess." She halted suddenly; her eyes snapped up to Will's. "Please tell me there are photos?"

Will smiled. "The official ones aren't ready yet. But we got someone at the venue to take a few on Hannibal's tablet."

Bev shook her head slowly, in mock disappointment. "I can't believe you didn't lead with that. You should've just whipped out your phone and held it up - that would've been *way* more dramatic." She held out her hand. "Show me now - I *demand* to see them."

Will passed his phone across to her. There were only a handful - a couple during the ceremony and a few more outside of them standing under the arbour. He didn't recall them being taken at all. In the photos, he looked at Hannibal and nowhere else.

Bev pored over them greedily. "The roses," she said suddenly. "They're like that first bunch of flowers he sent. Was that your idea?"

“No, that was all him,” Will said. “A surprise on the day. I wasn’t really thinking about flowers.”

“Shit,” she said. “You know what? Even if I had been mad, I’d just have forgiven you. No one on earth could withstand that kind of romance. Hell, I probably would’ve married him.”

“I brought it home with me,” Will said. “It’s upstairs in water.”

“*Shit*,” she said again, and put the phone down. Jabbed a finger at a picture of them exchanging rings. “*Married*, Will. I can’t believe it.”

“I know, right,” Will said. “Literally no one expected that, least of all me.”

*

Hannibal sat at his dining table, alone. Music played in his mind rather than through the room’s speakers; light fingers of sound and melody soothed some of the disturbance in his soul. Much had changed since he’d last eaten here; it was a comfort to stroll the halls of his palace and find it the same.

He took a bite of loin and chewed it slowly, appreciating its sweetness and soft, buttery texture.

Will would be at home now, explaining to Bev how he’d returned home with a wedding ring and a husband. She’d be shocked but she would temper her shock for the sake of their friendship. There was little danger there, not now it had been done. Will had worried about telling her right from the moment he’d conceived of the idea - it was why he’d held off until the wedding had passed into the realms of memory. And this evening he would tell her straight away, to ease his conscience.

Hannibal didn’t blame her for the shock; he was shocked about it himself. It was a strangely pleasant feeling, like the aftermath of a lightning strike. Once again, Will had taken him by surprise. Despite what he’d told Will, he had considered the matter. The snake ring had presented him with an opportunity difficult to ignore but Hannibal had written it off as too soon. Will was young; Hannibal very much wanted to remain close and watch him grow, cleverer and wiser, stronger and more beautiful. Any serious threat to that had been put to one side. The future held much promise, for both of them, and it was on that future which Hannibal had fixed his sights.

But that future had arrived more swiftly than anticipated. Will’s influence was disruptive; a storm. It had brought tumultuous winds and strange tides; a brimming moon. Now it was here, Hannibal waited breathlessly to see what else would follow.

He finished his meal and took the dishes into the kitchen. It was silent there, and still. Too still - two weeks with Will had left its mark. Hannibal turned up the music in his mind as he tidied the kitchen alone, then retired to the living room.

Once seated at the harpsichord, the room shivered and settled back into place. The shadowed quiet received the first notes graciously; Hannibal’s hands played, his heart beat its customary pace, his mind turned over new complexities with relish. Without any effort on his part Will appeared, as if conjured by the sound of the notes alone. He lay across the couch in an attitude of reading, his book obscuring most of his face. His hair gleamed, his was skin luminous; a pale rose by candlelight. His wedding ring shone vividly upon his left hand.

I may have acted impulsively, thought Hannibal. Impulsive to make such a promise before his other could be fulfilled.

But he had no regrets. He had no serious use for regret, anyway; it was fruitless and he rarely indulged in it. What concerned him now were practicalities; the potential and possibility of outcomes yet to occur. A delay in living together, although vexing, would be preferable for now.

Will was highly unusual. Hannibal had hopes he could be made to understand, in time.

He finished the movement with a flourish then gently shut the harpsichord lid. When he went upstairs he took with him a single rose, his buttonhole from the wedding. He planned to find a place for it, in the attic.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all your comments so far! Once my visitors have gone ~~and I no longer have to maintain this unnaturally high level of household cleanliness~~ I'll be back and replying with gusto :)

If you'd like to share this chapter with your followers, you can find it here on twitter and here on our tumblr.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will spent the next few days feeling out of place and out of sorts. It had been his understanding that a good vacation should leave you ready to get back to work with a light heart and renewed vigour but now he suspected that that was a simply cruel lie. He got out of bed each day in a heavy, resentful mood and scowled grumpily at himself in the mirror. Maybe he'd just needed a longer vacation, he thought while he brushed his teeth. Or more time with Hannibal to get accustomed to their new state.

It wasn't helping that they'd not seen much of each other since returning home. The summer job Professor Crawford had secured for him at the psychology department was tiring in a new kind of way, combining the most menial of tasks with too much smiling at people he didn't particularly want to smile at. Will's mind, which did at least feel rested and ready for some use, ground itself down on minor details in lieu of anything else to do. At the end of every day he carried home with him a curious blank exhaustion, and the evenings he spent with Bev, conscious that he had something to make up to her.

The result was that he only saw Hannibal once that week. Hannibal too had been extremely busy, his diary fuller than usual with conscientious patients wanting to catch up on their appointments. That precious evening his last session had ended at eight - Will had let himself into Hannibal's house and had waited in the study while he made a fitful start on the next semester's reading. By the time they had finished eating it was late and their reunion had been quiet rather than the passionate one Will had been hoping for.

It had still been good, though. He felt safe in the great sea of Hannibal's bed, sheltered by the softly-breathing form of Hannibal's body, and Will had slept well. In the morning they'd made a quick stop at a jeweller's so Will's ring could be resized and, after a small amount of deliberation, Hannibal had ordered an adjustment to his as well. The jeweller had assured them they would be ready to collect at the weekend and then they'd walked out and parted once again.

Will's job was slightly unorthodox; a favour really, which Professor Crawford had swung for him. As far as he knew, it hadn't been advertised among the wider student body. Crawford, aware that Will needed to work in between bouts of study, had suggested temporarily helping out at the department. Administrative staff had been cut to the bone and the two secretaries were always glad to have someone in to catch up on filing or answer the phones. The teaching staff had little support, either - there were plenty of odd jobs to be done, plenty to keep him busy. And, Crawford had suggested, there might be scope for Will to take on some light research assistant tasks, should one of the teaching staff be amenable.

Will had already made up his mind - anything sounded better than waiting tables - but the last part had pricked his ears up. As an undergrad, even on his accelerated programme, Will was expected to conform to college norms, which meant sticking with a normal course of study and not rushing ahead too quickly. The things which really interested him - criminology and criminal psychology, forensics and forensic psychology - and above all *research* - were all still somewhat out of reach. He attended lectures outside his scheduled ones whenever he could, browsed far and wide in college libraries, and even read Bev's medical textbooks when she left them lying around. So the

smallest chance of assisting a professor with their research made Crawford's offer worth it and Will had taken it up gladly.

But in practice it appeared that there wasn't quite enough work to keep him going. Some of the teaching staff were surprised to see him, like they had no idea he was going to be around to help, and were left scrabbling around trying to find something for him to do. The two secretaries, Joan and Melinda, always had piles of filing, photocopying and other minor tasks but they were prone to despairing about having nothing more interesting to give him. It was quite exhausting, having to reassure them both that he was happy enough *and* that he understood their jobs were more involved than doing a bit of typing and filing.

It was that sort of thing which he'd noticed becoming trying on the spirit. Spending the whole day filing wouldn't matter - that Friday morning it was heavy bound copies of several month's worth of departmental meetings - if he could've got on with it without truly surprising amounts of emotional labour. Thankfully, he had a full list of jobs to tackle that morning, meaning he could daydream about his upcoming weekend uninterrupted. If he'd had a radio to listen to, he might even have been quite cheerful.

"Ah, Will. Just the person I was looking for."

Will spun round, surprised - it was Professor Crawford. Will hadn't seen him all week, not even on his first day. Joan had hinted that there was some trouble at home which required his attention but she was too discreet to say anything more.

"When you've finished up here, come see me in my office." Prof Crawford glanced over at Joan and Melinda, sat in the dusty sunlight on the other side of the room. "I'm sure these two ladies won't mind if I borrow you for a while?"

Joan and Melinda affirmed this to be the case, with the correct dose of deference and an appropriate amount of humour. Crawford headed the department, after all, and Will was his impromptu appointment - he was Crawford's to do with as he liked.

"Hopefully he'll have something more interesting for you to do," Melinda said, once Will had finished with the files. Whenever they indulged in a coffee break, they made sure to include him. This time Melinda brought out a huge pack of M&Ms from her drawer and tipped some into Will's palm.

"I wish we had something better than filing to give you," Joan said, with predictable regularity. She was older than Melinda, with glasses Will thought of as 'spectacles' because of the way she peered over them to type.

Will hid his smile. His approaching weekend with Hannibal was making him feel generous - they were kind and they meant well, and it wasn't their fault he was ultra-sensitive to mood and emotion.

"Honestly, it's okay, I don't mind," he said. "My other option would've been waiting tables and this is much better."

The conversation ended as it always did, with understanding nods and a sigh.

*

Will didn't have to wait long at Crawford's door after knocking. He was summoned in immediately and found Crawford clicking away aggressively at his laptop mouse. Will closed the door and stood patiently while he waited for him to finish.

After three years, the room was intensely familiar. He'd been called in here for a meeting with Crawford on almost his first day. Will had started college young, at seventeen - he'd been granted a place at the age of sixteen but had had to wait another year before he could take it up. The interview with Crawford hadn't been required - the college were already satisfied it was fine to let him loose on campus (and had held many, many meetings about it) - but Crawford had wanted to meet this new and unusually young student himself. At the time Will had assumed he wanted to check he was up to the task, but now he thought it had been part curiosity as well. Their meeting had been brief but Will had seemed to have passed with flying colours - Crawford had kept a friendly eye on him ever since and was always ready to offer advice, asked for or not.

Now Crawford looked up suddenly, dismissing whatever had made him jab angrily at his keyboard and focusing his whole attention on Will. For anyone who wasn't used to him, it could be quite unnerving.

"Will," he said. "Take a seat."

The chairs in Crawford's office were nice ones, with well-made oak frames instead of durable coated steel, but they were creaky with age - funding never seemed to make it as far as the department's offices. Will sat down in one of them, keeping his expression politely interested.

Crawford closed his laptop and moved it aside to lean his elbows on the desk. "I'm hearing nothing but good things about you, Will. Now, I know what you're going to say." Here he raised a hand as if Will had objected. "That it's not been the most exciting job so far."

Crawford shifted in his chair, leaning further forward. "I know you're smart, Will. I saw it when you first came here, it's all over your work - that's not in doubt. But I wanted to see how well you'd manage with only menial tasks to occupy you. Wherever you go next and whatever you do there, it'll be the same - you'll be the smartest person in the room, but the youngest and the least experienced. You'll have to bite your tongue, get your head down and take direction. Sometimes those directions will seem pointless, a waste of your time - sometimes that might even be true. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Will nodded. "Yes sir."

Crawford tilted his chair back and considered Will for a moment. Though he was frowning, he looked pleased. "Good," he said, nodding. "That's good. Because I've had a request for your assistance - Dr Du Maurier is preparing a paper on cultural perspectives of psychopathy. I think she could use a student like you."

Will hadn't come across Dr Du Maurier before. She didn't teach any of his classes - in fact, she didn't teach any classes at all that he knew of - but he thought he remembered seeing her name on the faculty list.

"Mainly it will be taking notes, typing things up, that sort of thing. Dr Du Maurier has an interest in criminal psychology so no doubt you'll get the benefit of her thinking, get a feel for the subject. If that's something you're interested in, here's your chance to ask some questions."

"Thank you, sir," Will said. "That sounds like a great opportunity."

“Wonderful,” Crawford said. “I’ll pass along the news - Dr Du Maurier will contact you soon to arrange an initial meeting.”

Will stood, feeling Professor Crawford’s dismissal of him coming. It didn’t take long - a cursory nod from Crawford, a final expression of gratitude from Will, and then he was closing the door softly behind him.

The short walk back to the secretarial office didn’t give Will enough time to think but it was sufficient to appreciate both the compliment Crawford had paid him by singling him out and to consider Crawford’s motives. The hint he’d given about Dr Du Maurier’s interest in criminal psychology - that was intended to remind Will of Crawford’s opinions on a certain internship application.

Melinda was on the phone when Will reached the office. Joan waved him over, speaking in a loud whisper.

“Professor Haviland came by about fifteen minutes ago wondering if you could prepare a few reading packs for the next intake.” She patted a thick wad of papers on the edge of her desk.

“No problem,” Will said, with an internal sigh. “Did he say how many?”

“Fifty should cover it.”

“Right,” Will said, heaving them up. “Fifty. Of course.”

At least in the copying room he’d have time to think.

*

Will left the department just before five. He’d finished up yet another batch of photocopying and Joan and Melinda had taken pity on him, sending him home instead of finding a him new task for his remaining half-hour. Both of them had been in weekend spirits - the weather was fine and they’d spent a lot of the afternoon happily anticipating their plans. Melinda was visiting her daughter in D.C., Joan entertaining some friends in her garden.

The evening was a nice one, not too hot but with a pleasant shimmer of summer in the air. Will could’ve got a ride from Hannibal but he felt like a walk - there was a bus close to campus which would drop him fifteen minutes from his house. When it came, the bus was busy and the aircon broken so he was glad to get off and walk along the tree-lined streets, listening to the buzz of insects. Some of his weariness lifted and in its place fell the conversation he’d had with Crawford. Will chewed on it a while, feeling like there was something he’d missed. But Hannibal’s house was drawing close - Will mentally shelved his thoughts, placing them somewhere up high and out of reach. He had better things to think about with his weekend finally beginning and with Hannibal so close by.

But as soon as he unlocked the door and stepped into the foyer, something caught his attention: voices, more than one. He paused for a second, sliding his bag from his shoulder and setting it quietly on a chair as he listened. Alongside Hannibal’s soft voice was a woman’s. There were footsteps too, high-heeled ones.

Will checked his phone for missed messages, frowning: there were none. Hannibal hadn’t said anything about them expecting company when they’d parted at the jeweller’s. He pulled a compact

out of his bag to check his reflection and then looked down at his clothing. He looked okay, much like he always did, in slim jeans and a loose light top, but he felt crumpled and dusty after his day at work. If he'd known someone was joining them he probably would've dressed differently, and taken a little more care over it too. A stab of annoyance pricked him; he'd been looking forward to this moment all week but now there was someone here, intruding on their precious weekend.

He left his bag in the foyer and followed the sound of voices into the kitchen. He got a glimpse of Hannibal's back first, white shirt stretching rhythmically across his shoulders as he kneaded something on the counter. He didn't hear Will come in.

His guest did though. She was dark-haired and attractive, about ten years older than Will, leaning against the cabinets with a glass of beer in her hand. She was paying close attention to whatever Hannibal was demonstrating but her attention was immediately roused when Will entered.

After a small start of surprise, she smiled; bright but with a flash of something quickly hidden. "Hi! You must be Will?" she said. "Hannibal, Will's here."

Hannibal had already turned, wiping his hands on kitchen towel. He gave Will such a soft look that some of Will's annoyance subsided. Will drifted towards him, helpless and resenting it.

"Will," he said, "this is Alana Bloom, an old student of mine. We bumped into each other at the butcher's. Alana was deliberating over the steak and I suggested she dine on something more adventurous with us tonight."

Alana brought her beer over and set it down by Will's elbow. "I'm supposed to be getting a lesson in preparing lung but I think Hannibal is really more interested in talking about you. It's very nice to meet you Will."

She offered her hand; Will shook it. Quietly, he sized her up, and felt her doing the same to him. Her appearance was exceptionally feminine, hair long and lightly waved, dress patterned but still work-appropriate. She looked comfortable in Hannibal's kitchen, like she belonged there - Will wondered how he looked to her. Unconsciously, he touched the vacant spot where his wedding ring should have been.

"We're having lung?" Will glanced over to where Hannibal had been working. On the counter lay discarded tracheal tubes and a bowl of neatly-cubed meat. "Wow, I guess we really are having lung."

"That's what I said too." Alana took a sip of beer, sharing her smile with Will.

Will took a deep breath. His pique had risen again; Hannibal had had no particular reason to offer her an invitation for that evening and he hadn't asked if Will minded either - but that wasn't Alana's fault.

"If Hannibal says it's good, I tend to believe him," Will told her. "Experience has taught me that much."

"Hannibal's only cooked for me twice before," Alana said. "Once was definitely liver. I think the other time it was something more conventional."

"Conventional and also forgettable, apparently," Hannibal said, sweeping the tracheal trimmings off the chopping board and into a ziplock bag. The ziplock bag would go in the deep freeze. "I can

only apologise."

"I remember it was delicious, if that's any consolation," Alana said. "It must've been… about five or six years ago?"

"Seven," Hannibal said, smiling at her. "But I accept my powers of recall are somewhat unusual."

"Very gracious of you to forgive my lapses," she said, laughing. She turned her attention back to Will. "Hannibal tells me you study psychology at Johns Hopkins?"

"That's right," Will said. "What about you - what do you do?"

"Alana followed my example and took up psychiatry," Hannibal said. "And she knows Jack Crawford."

"I saw Professor Crawford today," Will said. "He wants me to assist one of the other professors with a research paper."

Alana looked impressed. "That's unusual for an undergrad," she said. "It's fairly unusual for Jack, too."

"Will is an unusual student," Hannibal said, proudly. He gave Will a glance, almost a wink. "Unusual in many regards."

"Some days I'd settle for plain old usual," Will said.

Hannibal frowned. "Did anything happen?"

Will shook his head. "No," he said. "It's just been a long week is all."

He suddenly felt worn out. There was an echo of something lingering between the two of them, something unfinished, and it was too much to deal with. It wasn't jealousy, not exactly; it was more like they were playing a game and Will was the only one without a copy of the rules. If he'd had some forewarning at least he could've prepared himself. The sullenness stewing quietly in his breast threatened to erupt but he firmly quashed it. He couldn't risk letting it get the better of him, not in front of Alana. He knew too well what she'd see then - a sulky teenager unsuited to a man of Hannibal's appearance.

Tactfully, Alana excused herself for a few moments. Will watched her go, able to admit now that she was dismayingly beautiful close up. He changed his mind about not feeling jealous and added it to the list of things he'd need to sort through later.

Hannibal gave him a quick and assessing look.

"Can I help with dinner?" Will said, careful to keep both his voice and face neutral.

Hannibal ignored his question, rounding the island to embrace him. Will sank into it - he was still pissed but it was comforting, apparently exactly the thing he'd been starving for. But it only made him more angry.

Will huffed into Hannibal's shoulder. "You could have warned me," he said. "I would've gone home and changed."

Hannibal squeezed him a little tighter before pulling back. His expression began to take on an apologetic aspect.

Will jabbed him in the shoulder, hard. “And don’t give me that face,” he said, cutting off the forthcoming explanation. “I know you did this deliberately because you thought I might avoid coming round until later.”

Hannibal didn’t bother denying it and he didn’t bother apologising either. “I promise I will if it ever happens again.”

“Hmmmn,” Will said. “Luckily for you I don’t want to fight in front of a guest but just remember I might change my mind about that next time.”

“A fight was definitely not my intention,” Hannibal said. “And Alana will leave at a polite interval after dessert, so if you’d like we can fight then.”

Will folded his arms. “You think you’re so charming,” he said. “You and her had a thing, right?” The look of sudden comprehension on Hannibal’s face made him add: “I just want to know the lay of the land, that’s all.”

“We did not,” Hannibal said, decisively. “We could have but we didn’t, and I assume for good reason.”

Will nodded, though he couldn’t help wondering if Alana would see it that way. But all he said was: “So do you want any help with dinner, or not?”

*

Hannibal refused help from either of them by smartly pointing out that everything was already done. But the entrée required a little of Hannibal’s attention before the appetisers were brought out, so Will had to endure ten minutes of stilted conversation with Alana while they waited at the table. He’d never had to play host before and it sat oddly on his shoulders.

Will expected to talk about Hannibal, since he was one of the few things they had in common, but he noticed Alana kept their conversation firmly in general, professional realms. She asked him questions about his study and his ambitions in a way which made him sorely conscious of their age gap, something which he never thought of when with Hannibal. He was sure she didn’t mean it, but it felt only a step away from being asked what he wanted to do when he grew up. If it hadn’t been for that, he might’ve sought her opinion. She would have been a good person to talk to: objective, with no angle to push.

As the minutes ticked painfully by, he became aware of something else - an undercurrent of unease which Alana hadn’t quite managed to mask with friendliness. It made Will wonder what Hannibal had told her about him before letting them meet.

“Can you indulge me in something?” Will asked. “How much did Hannibal tell you about me? I’m curious.”

“I think we covered pretty much all of the salient facts,” Alana said. “Showing you off seems to make him happy. Hannibal enjoys the rarefied and you, apparently, are the epitome of his tastes.”

“Not sure I can claim quite that much,” Will said. “I’ve got plenty of unappealing qualities for him to frown at - and he often does. But that hasn’t stopped him from taking me to every first night or gallery opening I’ll agree to go to.”

Alana’s smile was an uncomfortable one. “You don’t seem to mind,” she said. “Maybe we find we like the attention, once it’s ours.”

Hannibal chose that moment to enter, bedecked with plates and genialities, cutting off any response Will could’ve made. All talk swiftly became preoccupied with the food. Will ate silently, turning Alana’s words over in his head. It rankled that he hadn’t had time to correct her; it seemed she’d been left with the impression that their relationship was shallow and insubstantial. Maybe she thought Will was too young, something to be shown off and not much more.

Over dinner, Hannibal’s influence ensured the conversation flowed more easily and by the time dessert was on the way, Will was feeling a little more forgiving towards him. Hannibal’s dinners had that as a side effect - which, come to think of it, he’d probably been counting on to gain Will’s mercy. And Alana would be leaving soon: her impending departure crackled in the air. She’d politely refused more wine, checked her watch and been unable to believe how late the hour was, and then had been pressed to stay for dessert and perhaps coffee. In between, she’d enjoyed an appropriate amount of reminiscing about emergency room night shifts and expressed a wish that they shouldn’t leave it so long before meeting again. Will had been included in this - Alana had confessed to not being great in the kitchen but had suggested something vague about a restaurant. Nothing had been planned; it was a gesture only, a well-intentioned one, and Will was more than happy that that was the case.

After dessert, the party temporarily broke up; an encore before the curtain finally fell on their evening. Hannibal went to make coffee and Alana insisted on being allowed to help clear away. Will took the opportunity to excuse himself and assessed his reflection in the bathroom mirror while washing his hands. He looked okay, he thought, maybe a bit flushed. His eyeliner was smudged, too - he rubbed it with a damp finger then gave up. It didn’t matter. Soon he’d be taking it all off anyway, perhaps in preparation for a nice long bath. Hannibal might even join him.

When Will got back to the dining room, the table was clean and Alana’s chair was still empty. Voices could be heard emanating softly from the kitchen, along with the clink of what must be coffee cups. Will paused, a hand on the back of his chair. A desire tugged at him, growing fiercer the longer he lingered, to go into kitchen and… What? To disrupt whatever Hannibal and Alana were talking about; to insert himself into their conversation; to simply, by his presence, change its course? Will frowned at himself and his irrational urges. It was petty and silly, definitely beneath him, and he very nearly succeeded in making himself sit and wait for the coffee to be brought in.

But something else grabbed him, an instinct he couldn’t deny or name. It was only when he was outside the kitchen door that he realised what it was - Hannibal and Alana were talking about him. Suddenly, it was imperative to know what was being said.

“I warned you that you wouldn’t approve,” Hannibal was saying. “Was my assessment correct?”

His shadow passed by the half-open door. Will held his breath, frozen behind it. Alana’s reply came before he could decide if he really wanted to hear the answer.

“Your warning was intended to push me into approving,” she said. Her voice came from the far side of the kitchen, out of Will’s sight. “That you felt you had to was a warning all of its own.”

Hannibal turned around. Through the crack between the door and the frame, Will had a good view. Hannibal looked urbane and very much his age; his hair was gently silvering and it was noticeable under the bright spotlights.

“So am I courting your approval or disapproval?” he said. He placed the knife he was drying down; for a brief moment it flashed with light.

“Right now, I strongly suspect the latter,” Alana said. “This is none of my business, Hannibal, yet you seem keen for a reaction. You know what I would say if you were a client.”

He said nothing. He was calm and so still it was like he didn’t need to breathe.

“I agree that Will is definitely not an average twenty-year-old,” said Alana. “But I’d advise you to be careful - don’t make promises you can’t fulfil.”

Hannibal’s thin smile was directed down, at the coffee spoons he was laying methodically out on napkins. “I hadn’t realised my intentions were in doubt.”

There came a pause, one fat with suppressed speech: Alana was growing exasperated. “Twenty is a tender age,” she said. “A time of disillusionment. I know that from experience - things often turn out to be not what they seem. First nights and openings might amuse for now but both of you could end up in trouble.”

Will couldn’t hold himself in any more. He stepped out from behind the door and into the light of the kitchen. He wanted to be angry at Alana for doubting their relationship but when he spoke most of his rage was directed at Hannibal.

“You haven’t told her, have you?” he said. His voice was icy and clear; it didn’t shake at all.

Hannibal’s eyes met his, regretful and appeasing.

Alana’s face was pale where the flush of embarrassment hadn’t reached it. “Will,” she said, taking a step towards him. “I didn’t mean-”

Will drew a deep breath in. “We got married last week.” He saw the impact of his words, saw the force of surprise in Alana’s eyes. A grim satisfaction filled him. He took a step back; the room was deathlessly still. “I’ll leave you to it so you can scold him properly,” he said, then he turned on his heel and left.

He walked blindly, automatically, into the study and shut the door behind him. Once inside he wished he’d chosen to retreat upstairs, perhaps to run that bath he’d been looking forward to. He could’ve locked the door and closed himself in with smooth white tiles and soft diffuse light. And his phone was in the foyer, still in his bag. A long hot bath and some mindless scrolling - that was exactly what he needed to keep at bay the unpleasant churn of thoughts and feelings. He didn’t want to look at them too closely - knowing he was angry and tired and obscurely sad was enough.

He didn’t want to have to face Hannibal either, not yet. Will wasn’t sure if he’d done the right thing. Had he been irrational, crazy? Had he ‘caused a scene’? Already it was becoming hard to pick out clearly what had happened, who had been in the wrong and when. There was just his anger and a vague discomfort he avoided thinking of. *Twenty is a tender age.* He thought of how his outburst must’ve looked to Alana - had it seemed hysterical and overly dramatic? Alana’s reactions, his, Hannibal’s, confused and swirled, and the experience, as always, brought back to Will the

hushed suggestion of the school counsellor that a psychologist might be consulted; that the episodes of runaway feelings his ten-year-old self displayed might not be entirely normal.

Which they had turned out not to be, of course. But the psychologist who diagnosed him had been kind and friendly - Will had liked her almost immediately. It had taken the better part of six months for her to recognise such a rare condition and then longer to have it confirmed by a specialist. In the meantime, she'd taught him different ways of managing it when it became too much - what to do when the seat of his mind felt too open, raw and exposed, or when he found other people's voices and experiences jumbling around with his own. The technique he tried now was one he didn't often need - a simple grounding exercise, useful for times when the noise in his head threatened to suffocate everything else.

Will chose the armchair opposite the door and curled up into it. He stretched and wiggled his shoulders, jaw, fingers to shed some of their tension, then he took a deep breath and made himself focus on his surroundings, no matter how small, mundane or familiar. Starting from the left-hand side of the room, he noticed and silently named the sideboard, and the two lamps and small bronze of a deer which stood on top. Above it on the wall were three Japanese prints. Next came the door which, in common with the rest of the house, was set deep into its frame so that the handle fell into shadow. Then there was the wall to his right; set in front of it was the desk, slender-legged and carved from walnut. On it sat a desk lamp, a clean pad of paper, and two stacked books, heavy and bound in deep brown leather with gilt edging.

The frayed edges of his mind had softened into calm. Will relaxed further, encouraging it to bleed through into the centre, cooling the heat of his imagination and checking its influence. He moved smoothly from simple nomenclature to appreciation; if he couldn't be upstairs, soaking in the bath, then the study was the next best place to find himself. Its proportions were smaller than those of the living room - in the right mood and at the right time of day it could be called cosy. As well as the desk, there were a couple of armchairs and plenty of books, some displayed in open shelves and some older and more valuable, which were hidden away in a handsome closed cabinet. It reminded Will of Hannibal's office but in miniature - the wealth of books, the considered scattering of objects and art, the dark comfortable corners designed for reading and thought.

Thinking of Hannibal's office steadied him considerably: it was the place they'd first met and first kissed. Will had felt a pleasure at being there, a sense of rightness, which had been inexplicable at the time. The memory brought home the nature of their relationship, its foundations and its truth, and swept away the lingering threads of doubt and uncertainty which Alana had sown.

Will took a deep breath and felt the last shreds of fog lift. There was no need for panic. Relationships had their discomforts, momentary awkwardnesses, brief spells of unhappiness. Occasionally, they would knock into each other and cause pain, and then after they would learn and grow together. It would pass.

It was what marriage was all about, wasn't it?

From outside came the sound of a door closing, and then footsteps; they seemed to recede from where Will was sitting. A silence followed.

A pang rose in Will's throat. He began to regret wishing for solitude, wanting instead to be sought, missed, looked for. He waited, without realising he was waiting, for many minutes. When the knock at the study door finally came, he started in his seat.

The door opened: there was Hannibal.

For a moment Will didn't move; he remained in the chair, one knee propped up against the armrest, the other tucked into his chest. Possibly Hannibal mistook his quiet for anger because he spoke softly and with a certain amount of wariness.

"Alana has gone," he said. "She wanted me to tell you how sorry she was and that she knows she spoke out of turn."

Will nodded absently. He wasn't sure what to say so he said nothing.

"It's me she can't understand." Hannibal stepped further inside, closing the door quietly behind him. "Not you. It's nothing to do with you."

Will stirred and raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that? My age played quite the role in that conversation." He paused, chewing on a thumbnail. "Sorry for listening in - I didn't intend to but then I heard what you were saying and I… well." Will shrugged. "There's no excuse. Sorry."

Hannibal came closer. He lay a hand on the armrest by Will's knee and knelt down. Will looked at the span of his knuckles and his long fingers and felt another pang. It seemed like an age since Hannibal had properly touched him.

"I'm sorry too, for not telling her about the wedding sooner. I see now it would've been better that way."

"Why didn't you?" There it was again, the thing which had impelled him to storm into the kitchen and speak. His anger had softened; now Will just felt confused, bruised of heart.

"I wanted her to meet you first," said Hannibal. "I was intending to tell her before you walked in."

Will groaned and hid his face in his hands. A vision of Alana, shocked and pale, wearing a grimace of regret, of embarrassment, resurfaced. "God, she must think I'm truly awful. I hope you don't have any dinner plans for a while - I don't think I can face her again just yet. Maybe never."

Hannibal shifted closer. A rustle of fabric preceded the gentle touch of fingers stroking Will's hair. "I think she might just share that sentiment," he said. "You've forgiven her her trespasses, then?"

Will let his gaze skitter away in thought. "I guess so? She's entitled to think whatever she wants and if I hadn't overheard it wouldn't have mattered." He paused and rubbed his neck. "I'm used to people not really understanding us."

Hannibal's head tilted sharply; he'd scented an unspoken thought. "I thought Bev had come around to the idea?"

"She has," Will said. "I think. Not all her enthusiasm is entirely believable but I'd say she's broadly supportive."

Hannibal frowned; a tiny movement, just a flicker of irritation around the temples. Unconnected with Hannibal's impatience with Bev, Will felt a lurch, a familiar one. It was guilt. Old guilt.

"There's something else," Will said. "Something I haven't told you."

This time Hannibal's frown was whole and fully-formed, hardening his face into stone. Will took both of his hands in his own, steeling himself.

“And you’re going to be really mad, especially after the way I just acted.”

Hannibal squeezed his hands. “What is it?” He spoke with urgency in his voice.

Will breathed deeply in. “I haven’t told my parents,” he said. “Not just about the wedding - about you. Not at all.”

There was a terrible silence. Hannibal’s face became subtly unreadable, which Will knew was a very bad sign.

“I didn’t mean not to tell them,” he said. “I’m not even sure why I didn’t. Every time I thought about telling them I’d met someone and it was serious, I’d imagine the kind of questions they’d have and I couldn’t think of a way to explain you without giving the wrong impression.” He stopped and bit his lip. “And the longer it went on for, the harder it got. So I just… Didn’t.”

Hannibal drew back slightly, gaze held low in thought. Will hugged both knees into his chest and watched him. He often liked to imagine he could see the race and dash of Hannibal’s mind, the mechanical precision and the flash of inspiration, but now there was nothing at all to see. It was veiled from him completely.

“I suppose it’s my own fault,” Hannibal said eventually. “If I’d shown more interest in meeting them, if I hadn’t been so selfishly caught up in you…”

“Both of us got caught up,” Will said. “Big time. But the fault is all mine. I’m truly sorry, Hannibal - I’ll fix it just as soon as I can.”

Hannibal looked up sharply. “Do you regret getting married?” he asked. “It was not my intention to trap you. If I have, it can be undone.”

“No, no,” Will said. “Of course not.” He stared into Hannibal’s eyes, confused. Hannibal looked back, his passion visible but tightly controlled. “Never,” Will said again, in a low sure voice. “I love you. I want to be with you, always.”

Hannibal nodded once, a gesture tersely succinct. Will reached for him, leaning forward out of his seat, sliding his arms around his neck. Hannibal’s hands caught him, enfolding and pulling. Will ended up on the floor with his knees digging into the rug and his chest pressed to Hannibal’s.

They embraced silently for a few moments. Will let his head relax on Hannibal’s shoulder; slowly they settled more comfortably onto the floor. Their fingers were entwined in Hannibal’s lap. Will looked at them, at the differences of size and colour, at the differing signs of age. At the bare space on Hannibal’s ring finger.

“I’m looking forward to getting my ring back,” Will says. “I’ve missed it. I don’t feel right without it.”

Hannibal’s arm was heavy, its grip loose around Will’s waist. “Tomorrow,” he said, kissing his neck. “Tomorrow.”

And Will knew then that he’d been forgiven.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

warning for a moment of mild, but aggressive, nonverbal transphobia/homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weather turned in the night. Rain drummed angrily against the windows as they lay down to sleep but by morning it had passed. Breakfast was hardly over before Will was opening the doors to the garden wide and finding the paved path there damp and gritty under his bare feet. Outside was a little bistro-style table, jewelled with rain. He took out a cloth to dry it; underneath clung the ragged ghosts of spiders' webs and he wiped those away too.

The table and its two matching chairs had appeared in the garden one day, set close to the sunniest wall; wrought-iron and marble-topped, suitable for all weathers. Perhaps they'd been in Hannibal's possession all along, stored in a recess of his capacious garage or an unnoticed corner of the wine-cellar, but Will liked to think there was a different explanation. The table was small and cosy, just big enough for two. The garden was small and walled, unadorned; there were no flowers or beds and the only decoration came from the two topiary boxwoods which framed the dining room doors. The effect was, for Hannibal, strangely anonymous, and nothing at all like the rest of the house. Alone, he would be indoors with his music and his baroque interiors; Will could only conclude that the table and chairs had been put there for his own pleasure, a thought he enjoyed very much.

The sky was bright, if clouded. By lunchtime the air would be warm and humid but just then it retained a memory of the night's rain - a dewy freshness which chilled the wrought-iron seats and made Will glad of the robe wrapped around him. He'd only just sat down when Hannibal came out with coffee and the half-croissant Will had left behind in his haste. He seated himself next to Will in silence.

It was early for a Saturday and everything was quiet; Will studied him peaceably, drinking his coffee. Hannibal's face was still blurred from sleep; he wore a red sweater and pyjama pants which paired with the shirt Will had on. His expression stirred only a little, when his attention was drawn by a sound beyond the garden or a bird flying overhead, but inwardly he was fully active. He tended to wake completely and all at once, ready for conversation and for life in its entirety, whereas Will needed longer. His own talk that morning had been confined to the necessary - what to eat, what to drink, a desire for outdoor air. Hannibal was simply waiting, with extreme and measured patience, for Will to join him on the paths of his mind.

"Almost had enough coffee now," Will said. "It's safe to speak - I'm open for business."

Hannibal turned his gaze fully upon Will. It was clear-eyed and purposeful; a smile played across his features. "I was wondering about Jack Crawford," he said. "You seemed a little on edge last night when you mentioned him."

Will had to admire the tact of his phrasing. It managed to avoid the still-tender subjects of last night's argument whilst enquiring into the very thing Will had dodged discussing in front of Alana.

“Did I?” he said. “I don’t know, maybe I was. Professor Crawford and I had a talk and it left me feeling a bit… under pressure?”

Hannibal tilted his head, like a foxhound who’d just caught a scent. “And what was it that Jack said which led you to feel that way?”

“It’s not so much what he says as the way he says it,” Will said. “But then I feel ungrateful because all he’s doing is helping me.”

“Better out than in,” Hannibal said. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

He sat back in his chair, legs crossed and fingers folded loosely in his lap. There flashed in Will’s mind a clear and sudden image of him with a patient; the way he’d listen, fully focused but comfortingly detached. How seductive it was - no wonder his practice was so successful.

“First of all is this job,” Will said. “It’s his department and his budget so I guess Professor Crawford can do what he wants - but I’m pretty certain he bent the rules by just giving it to me like that. Then yesterday he offered me an opportunity to help another professor with a paper. It’s great, it’s exactly what I want, but…”

Will trailed off, stuck. It *was* great to have this opportunity, usually out of the reach of an undergrad, but nevertheless something about it bothered him.

Hannibal let the pause hang, but when Will didn’t fill it he spoke again. “If he did bend the rules for you, that was his choice and his responsibility. Not yours. Does that trouble you?”

“Yes,” Will said. “I know this is how the world works and that everyone likes to pretend it doesn’t - it’s not what you know but who you know, and all that. But I still don’t like it.”

“Have you considered that what you know is enough on its own to earn you these rewards?” Hannibal asked. “Why should Professor Crawford get all the credit?”

Will frowned and looked away. That was hard to contemplate - he was sure he had a lot still to prove before he’d feel he deserved to be singled out like this.

“When we become used to struggling with the obstacles in our path, it can be disorientating to suddenly find our way clear,” Hannibal said. “Jack hasn’t removed all the obstacles, just a few. Many students, the ones without your background and with far fewer hurdles to jump, would take his help in their stride. Some would accept it as their due. Why shouldn’t you?”

Some of Will’s resistance crumbled. Hannibal, he knew, had a point. He’d observed that the more affluent the student, the more they took help for granted. “Did you have help?” he asked.

“Of course,” Hannibal said. “Aside from my aunt and uncle, there was Dr Dumas. He secured a medical scholarship for me in exchange for my anatomical drawings. And later, he brought them to attention of Johns Hopkins, who then offered me an internship.”

The knowledge was warming and softened Will further. He’d known Hannibal had won an internship but hadn’t known how. “So you might still be in Paris if it wasn’t for Dr Dumas, then,” he said, reaching for Hannibal’s hand and squeezing it. “I seem to have a lot to thank him for.”

Hannibal smiled back. “As do I,” he said. “Having the help of a mentor is not at all unusual, especially if you show particular promise. But is it the simple fact of Jack’s help which is leading you to feel under pressure or is there something else?”

Will thought back to Professor Crawford’s office. *You’ll be the smartest person in the room, but the youngest and the least experienced*, he’d said. *You’ll have to bite your tongue, get your head down and take direction.*

“Yeah, there is,” Will said. “His help has a bearing, a particular tone. I think he’s prepping me for something - probably that internship at the FBI.”

Hannibal was listening carefully. “What makes you suspect that?”

“His talk yesterday was all very *you gotta show willing to make the team, Will*. He really wants me to make the team.” Will paused, shrugged. “I don’t know what to think - do I want to? Is that a direction I want to go in?”

“Jack was a Navy man in his younger days,” Hannibal said. “He told me once that that was where his interest in psychology first started.”

Will nodded. “Yeah, I can see that - there’s something of my father about him sometimes.”

“Your father also began his career in the Navy and moved on to other things,” Hannibal said.

“I think he misses it sometimes,” Will said. “He certainly found it a hell of a lot easier than dealing with my mother.” A beat passed; Will shredded the rest of his croissant into flakes without eating any of it. “Why do you think Professor Crawford is so keen to push me in the direction of the FBI?”

“Because he believes it to be to your benefit,” Hannibal said. He took a breath, considering. “Jack will have had help too, when he was starting out, from someone who pushed him towards wider horizons. He thinks you’re deserving of the same. The FBI is a venerable institution which operates at the leading edge of criminal psychology - for someone with your interests and abilities it’s an opportunity to be explored. Why wouldn’t he push you to seriously consider it?”

It all sounds so rational, Will thought. *It* is *rational*. He groaned and put his head in his hands. “Everytime I think about it I hear my dad telling me that it’d be a steady government job. He’d be so proud it’s nearly painful.”

“It’s only an internship, Will,” Hannibal reminded him. “Not a life sentence.”

“I know, I know.” He sat and pulled his coffee closer to him. It was almost cold. “I’m being ridiculous. It’s not a bad problem to have, is it?”

“What about your mother?” Hannibal asked. “What would she think?”

Will snorted into his coffee. “Well, she hates cops, so I can’t imagine what she’d say if I joined the FBI. Even as a regular employee.”

Hannibal gave a short laugh, a sound of true mirth. Will glanced up at him, eyebrows raised - Hannibal looked delighted and he didn’t even know the worst of it yet.

Will delivered the punchline, grinning now. “But she hates psychologists almost as much - to her it’s like I’ve been stolen by a cult.”

Hannibal’s smile grew broader; Will could tell he was deeply interested. “And now her only child has married a psychiatrist,” he said. “Oh dear, Will, what have you done?”

“Oh no, she’ll be fine about you being a psychiatrist,” Will said, with a wave of his hand. “She likes Jung plenty - the mysteries of the unconscious are right up her alley. What she doesn’t approve of are repeatable experiments and labs, white coats, *science*. She thinks it simplifies what shouldn’t be simplified.”

“An opponent of the science of the mind,” Hannibal said. “Well, when we meet we shall have plenty to talk about. You know I’m less than convinced myself of psychology’s claim to scientific status.”

Will leaned back in his seat, suddenly comfortable and warm and happy. The problem of Professor Crawford and the FBI faded into insignificance - what did that matter compared to Hannibal’s sincere interest in getting to know his mother? He’d spent a year deliberately keeping them apart - now he was beginning to suspect they were both just weird enough to get along.

“It’s not that I didn’t want you both to meet, you know,” he said. “I actually think that, when she sees us together, she’ll understand better than anyone else.”

“She sounds delightful,” Hannibal said. “I’m looking forward to it very much.”

“I bet you are,” Will said. “All those lingering details of my childhood, just ready to pried out of her…”

“Of course I want to see where you grew up - to stand in the places where you were formed and try to look through your eyes,” Hannibal said. He leaned in confidentially: “But I’d particularly love to know where your mother’s abhorrence of the law comes from.”

Will laughed. “Mainly from parking tickets and the refusal of the government to legalise marijuana, I think.” A silence fell and inevitably Will thought of Hannibal’s family - all dead now, even his aunt. There was no one for Will to be introduced to and no family home for them to visit together. “I wish I could do the same for you,” he said. “The places where you were formed seem far distant, inaccessible to me.”

“They are,” Hannibal said. “My childhood left few visible traces and those that survived have now been buried. But I could show you Paris. And Florence, too.”

“I’d like that,” Will said. “One day we’ll go. If I can’t meet your family, I can at least see some of the places you’ve called home.”

“Agreed.” Hannibal took up his hand and kissed it. “Not quite the hall of my beginnings,” he said. “But close.”

*

They made it to the jeweller’s long before lunchtime. Will could’ve sat in the garden all morning but the memory of a wedding ring on his finger, an unfamiliar sensation after such a short time and one already fading, made him eager to retrieve it. Hannibal seemed to be of the same mind. They

hadn't made any other plans for their day and only hastened, with an unspoken understanding, to carry out their errand.

The jeweller's was a small, discreet store with window displays which were both restrained and eye-wateringly expensive. Inside was no better, particularly behind the counter where some alarmingly large diamonds sparkled. The only available assistant was busy, fetching and replacing tray after tray of bracelets from a locked cabinet for the benefit of an elderly couple. She excused herself to alert her colleague to the presence of waiting customers; in her absence the elderly couple, silent until then, burst into a deep discussion. Will listened with half an ear - it was to be a present for a daughter, or maybe a daughter-in-law. Neither of them could remember for certain her opinion on rose gold but one was sure she loathed it and the other the opposite. The assistant came back, assured Hannibal her colleague would be just a moment, and the couple went silent again.

While they waited, Hannibal lingered by a selection of vintage jewels. Will watched with no little amount of apprehension - there was a delicate pearl and diamond pendant and a handsome old-cut sapphire ring he showed particular interest in.

"Don't you dare," Will whispered in his ear. "I have a wedding ring, I don't need any more jewellery. I hardly even *wear* jewellery."

Hannibal didn't budge from his perusal of the cabinet. "But I only have a year before I must find you an anniversary gift."

He was teasing and Will knew it but he whispered back: "The first year is paper - get me a notebook instead."

Hannibal was still chuckling softly to himself when someone came out from the back: a man, tall and capable-looking. He remembered them immediately.

When he fetched their rings out, the jeweller politely insisted they both try them on so he could properly check the fit. Will obediently slipped it into place on his finger again. He watched Hannibal do the same and was strongly reminded of standing before the officiant; of speaking the words aloud and then hearing Hannibal speak, into the soft hush of the room. His mind and senses were lifted out of the store - he could smell polished wooden floors warmed by the sun, strewn with rose-petals, dripped on by candles. Above them gold-leafed arches soared; everywhere there was light; light and music and joy.

Once outside, restored to the greyness of an ordinary street, Will experienced a moment of unfamiliar shyness. The Hannibal of his imagining still stood, pale-suited, in the chapel he'd built in his mind. A husband: one Will didn't know yet. The real Hannibal was taking Will's hand and tucking it into the crook of his arm. He seemed in a buoyant mood, no different to the man Will had known as his boyfriend.

They walked like that back to the car, Will glad to have Hannibal's solidity by his side. They were together again, joined until parted by death. It was both sobering and exhilarating.

"I feel married again," Will said, after a moment. "It's been weird this week, being apart but being together in this new way."

"It's not ideal," Hannibal agreed.

“And I’ve only myself to blame,” Will said, feeling suddenly cheerful about it. “We could’ve done everything in the proper order but I insisted.”

The Bentley loomed in the lot, sleek and powerful. Will climbed into the passenger’s side and wondered exactly when he’d got used to sliding into its huge enveloping luxury, when he’d started to expect it.

“We’ll manage,” Hannibal told him, as they both fastened their seatbelts. “Change is always a process, no matter what order you take it in. This evening we’ll start to solve the problem of us living together.”

He reached for the ignition but Will put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“If I weren’t here what would you normally be doing on a Saturday afternoon?” Will asked.

Hannibal drew back from the wheel, and gave Will his full attention instead. “Any number of things - errands, reading, catching up with work perhaps. I might be preparing to give a dinner or to attend an evening engagement.” He paused, a slight frown on his face, and added, “It’s been a long time since I had a Saturday afternoon to myself - not sure I’d call it normal now.”

Nice as it was, Will left that remark uncommented on. He was following a train of thought and did so ruthlessly. “So… dry cleaners, florists and food markets?”

Hannibal laughed at him. “Perhaps you could put it that way. Where is this conversation leading, Will?”

“I love your house and I feel at home there,” Will said, “but it’s unavoidably yours. You treat me like a guest and all the untidy bits of your life are kept away from me. The errands, the bill paying, taking out the trash. Even at the beach house- Laundry!” The revelation hit him hard; he spun round in his seat to face Hannibal fully. “Do you realise I’ve never seen you do laundry?”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never seen you do laundry, either,” he said. He leaned over and pretended to inspect Will’s shirt. “Are you sure you know how?”

“Ha ha - I’ll have you know Bev is the unclean one. I almost *never* pick things out of the laundry bin to wear again.”

“Glad to hear it,” Hannibal said. “So today you’d like to be initiated into the untidy bits of my life. Is that correct?”

“That’s exactly it,” Will said. “If we can’t live together full time now, we can at least try to do it properly when we are together.”

“Beginning this afternoon?” Hannibal said. “There’s a farmers market I would visit some Saturdays - we could go and choose something for dinner together.”

And that was exactly what they did. It was lunchtime and the market was bustling, particularly the street food stalls. The ones Hannibal would be interested in were quieter - Will could feel the path he’d take through the clumps of milling people, clustered round the stalls selling cold brew coffee and vegan brownies. But Hannibal was careful not to take the lead - he walked slowly, allowing Will time to look round and orient himself.

There was much to consider. They paused at a vegetable stall, piled high with a confusing mass of colour. Many people passed it by unseeingly, seeking instead the homemade cakes at the next stall, but every so often someone stopped to examine the whorl of a lettuce or a tangle of pea pods. Meat was more popular, both in its raw and prepared states. Cured sausages dangled, their tender skins dusted with a white bloom, above lengths of paprika-stained chorizo. Beyond that was a chilled counter with raw pre-packaged cuts, already pale and watery in their shrink-wrapped plastic. But there was also a butcher's block and a man in a heavy apron cleaning his knives. Just behind the stall Will caught a glimpse of a refrigerated van, its doors opening and closing, revealing the bloody, glistening contents hanging from its ceiling.

There they stopped. "To build a dish, we begin with the protein," Hannibal said. He drew Will's attention to the chalkboard at the back of the stall. "What interests you most?"

Will scanned the board. It contained all the usual suspects - beef, pork, lamb; steaks, ribs, loin. None of it seemed inspiring - to Will it was just a list of words. He wasn't sure how Hannibal took them and created the food he served.

Hannibal had noted his lack of enthusiasm. "Maybe you'd prefer white meat?" he suggested. "Or fish?"

Will frowned, annoyed at himself and his indecision. The man in the apron had stopped cleaning his knives; there were dark stains on his apron. Without meaning to, Will caught his eye. He'd been waiting for another customer but now he was looking, staring, at Will. Will recognised his expression - he'd seen it often enough. It was a look of confusion and resentment; a look of desire, and anger at the object of desire for causing it in the first place. It was a look that contained subtle violence, the sort the bearer probably wasn't aware of until it all came spilling out.

Will pulled his gaze back to Hannibal. "Yeah," he said. "I don't think I want anything from here. Let's get a chicken."

From another stall they procured a chicken and later, on an impulse of Hannibal's, a fat piece of salmon. Together they chose some peas and a scattering of fresh beans, as well as some lemons, a round soft cheese, a bag of tiny potatoes that smelled strongly of damp earth, and a melon. It was surprisingly easy and when it was time to stow it into the car Will was shocked at how much they'd bought. There was a cooler stashed in the Bentley's trunk, now filled with some of the fishmonger's ice, so the food travelled home in as much comfort as they did.

On the way they discussed different ways to cook and serve what they'd bought. Will enjoyed himself almost as much as Hannibal. Dinner would begin with a salad of fresh peas and beans, dressed with lemon and oil, and scattered with cheese. They agreed that something more complex was needed after the salad and that a simple roast wasn't going to cut it. It was Will's idea to barbeque it - though he'd been unsure how Hannibal might receive such a homely suggestion - but Hannibal had been pleased, and offered up a melon and citrus sorbet for dessert. The salmon, they decided finally, would be used for a Japanese breakfast on the Sunday.

"I'm glad you decided on chicken," Hannibal said, as they pulled into the garage. "Now I think of it, the meat the butcher was selling had a decidedly pallid look. Underbred, almost. I must make a note not to buy from him again - he doesn't deserve our custom."

*

Will was in particularly delightful spirits when they arrived home: pink-cheeked and flushed with his success at the market. Hannibal watched him and glowed with something new. It fed an urge which had been building for some time - he could trace it to that first morning they'd spent together, when Will had appeared downstairs in his pyjama shirt and not much else. It had carried his scent for days; so had the pillow he'd laid his head on. Hannibal had brooded long over the subject, wondering why he should be visited now by something he'd never sought. But the facts themselves had been inescapable and from then on he'd allowed and encouraged Will's slow insinuation into his life and home.

Now Will had asked to know the untidy parts of Hannibal's life, which apparently began with the unpacking of the groceries. He hovered by the cooler, waiting for guidance. He'd always respected the kitchen as Hannibal's personal space - despite a habit of sitting on surfaces not meant for sitting on, and which Hannibal found perplexingly pleasing. Will understood it was theatre and played his role as audience member perfectly, taking pains not to interfere with the props or any of the major players. Enjoyable as that had been, everything must now change. Their marriage dictated it; it had become desirable.

Caution was needed, however. Circumstances unfortunately did not favour Will having complete autonomy in the house - sooner or later he'd find the only place not yet open to him. *But*, thought Hannibal, *his beginnings in the kitchen should be harmless enough*.

The cooler was emptied slowly, like a game or a dance. Will smiled through it, self-conscious but happy, willing to make a joke out of anything he could. But he listened with enthusiasm as Hannibal instructed him - when something should go in the pantry and when in the refrigerator, which shelves to use and why, the best wraps and coverings for different kinds of foods. He stood tucked close to Hannibal, before the cold damp breath of the refrigerator; his hair brushed Hannibal's cheek when he leaned across the inspect the arrangement of wrapped paper packages on the bottom shelf. It smelled of vanilla and, faintly, of artificial strawberries - Hannibal breathed it in and wondered how it had become his favourite scent.

They prepared the chicken immediately after they'd finished. Hannibal was ready to demonstrate how to joint it but Will revealed he already knew how. He hadn't had much involvement in the practical elements of cooking - it was part of their language that Hannibal should give and he should take, particularly in the kitchen. So it was with fascination that Hannibal watched him wield the cleaver, splintering the breast bone and severing cartilage, while they discussed what the rub should consist of.

"My mother didn't cook much," Will said, waving away Hannibal's brown sugar and replacing it with dried thyme and oregano. "But I remember this - we'd have it at the beginning of the summer season, the first night I'd stay with her after dad had left for the boatyards. Got any fennel seeds?"

Hannibal measured some out under Will's critical eye. He smiled inwardly when Will added: "More cayenne. And more paprika too."

Hannibal caught his eye; Will grinned sheepishly, suddenly conscious of his bossiness.

Hannibal smiled and kissed his temple. "I like learning these things about you," he said. "There's no need to feel bad for instructing me - tell me everything your parents cooked for you and we will make it here, together."

"Really?" Will said. "You'd better prepare yourself for a lot of catfish recipes." His eyes widened as a thought struck him. "We should do this for Bev. Invite her over, cook her dinner."

This idea had already occurred to Hannibal as the next natural step in encouraging her to finally bestow her blessings, but it would be a far more effective strategy coming from Will.

He lowered his voice and assumed a teasing tone. “Will - are we going to host a dinner party?”

Ever charmingly belligerent, Will replied, “You can call it whatever you want. I’d call it having a friend for dinner.”

“Even better,” Hannibal said, and toasted the idea with the glass of wine he’d left standing on the side.

Dinner was a success. Having had a hand in it, Will enjoyed the results even more than usual. The rub was a topic of particular interest: Will comparing it to the memory of meals past and Hannibal suggesting minor alterations and improvements. He was already thinking of making it again - the tradition of it marking the transition between Will’s two childhood homes appealed to him greatly. It might be of use in helping Will move from feeling like a guest in Hannibal’s house to having a more permanent place there. Perhaps it would be something to surprise him with, one Friday night soon.

Afterwards, Hannibal decided to commit the recipe to paper. The proportion of spice to herb was good and it would be a sound base on which to improvise, should the mood take him. And Will would appreciate the gesture, and would trust him with similar gifts in the future.

He filled in the title last. “How does your mother like to be addressed?” he asked. “Mrs Graham?”

Will spluttered with laughter. “God, no,” he said. “Connie, short for Constance - sometimes even I call her that. She’s never gone by Mrs anything and I don’t think she ever will. She hasn’t got much time for traditional family roles - that’s why she didn’t live with us.”

“I assumed your parents were separated,” Hannibal said. “Is that not the case?”

“It’s complicated,” Will said. “They love each other, in their own ways. Neither of them has ever looked at anyone else - definitely not my dad and, well, if my mom had she wouldn’t exactly have kept it from me. But he’s too traditional and she’s too independent and they could never really figure it out.”

“So they live apart but still love,” Hannibal said. The idea was faintly troubling. A memory rose up, unasked for, of a truth he’d once admitted to Will: *you are like quicksilver,* he’d said, and he was. Shifting, unpredictable, perhaps harder to hold onto than Hannibal knew.

“That’s about the long and the short of it,” Will said, and went back to polishing the glasses.

Before bed, Hannibal checked his phone. He disliked its interruptions, particularly when absorbed in something else. Particularly when that thing was Will.

He’d missed a call from Alana and there was a voicemail. He listened to it carefully then waited for Will to finish in the bathroom.

“Alana has been in touch,” he said. He watched Will undress, shedding his more masculine outer layers - shirt, t-shirt, jeans - to reveal the feminine ones underneath. Will had never confirmed it but Hannibal theorised that choosing feminine underwear was a habit he’d formed as a teenager, a strategy which must’ve allowed him to express himself safely in unsafe places - Will spoke rarely

of highschool. “She wanted to apologise again, to you especially. Would you like to listen to her message?”

Will considered it while he brushed his hair. It had grown longer recently, his curls softening into waves which kissed his clavicles.

He shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said. “There’s no need. Tell her not to worry about it.”

Hannibal didn’t respond.

Will turned round, emphatic but calm. “Hannibal, it’s fine. Really. I don’t begrudge her her opinions and I don’t feel the need to prove anything to her either. I’d rather just forget about it.”

Hannibal nodded. He switched his phone off before laying it aside.

Will came over, frowning. He stood over Hannibal, lean and strong and youthful, clothed in softness and almond-scented soap - Santa Maria Novella’s finest.

“*You* begrudge her though,” he said, and held Hannibal’s face between his palms.

Hannibal sighed. “Perhaps more than I thought.” Alana’s words of warning had mattered little but now they mingled with other dangers - quicksilver ones.

Will stroked Hannibal’s hair back from his forehead. His hands were warm, lightly calloused and tender. “Few people will ever really understand us, Hannibal,” he said. “And it doesn’t matter.”

He is beautiful, Hannibal thought. *Few people understand that either.* An image of the butcher, dishonest and covetous, raised itself from Hannibal’s mind. A disgusting beast, not worthy to look upon him. Hannibal banished it with only minor effort and called up something more pleasing instead.

“Do you know what I was thinking of in the jeweller’s?” he said. “While you were suggesting a bit of paper would be a suitable gift for our first wedding anniversary, I was thinking of each and every jewel in that case, deciding which I’d reset and which I’d duplicate, and then where I’d place them on your body. I want to drape you in them, in all of them, and fuck you.”

Hannibal’s hands had moved, grasping Will around his waist. Will leaned into his grip, mouth curved, eyes sparkling.

“Do I call your name,” Will said, “in this fantasy?”

Hannibal smiled. “Many times.”

“Those are some big words,” Will said. He pushed forward, into Hannibal’s hands, to straddle his lap. “Let’s keep count, shall we?”

Hannibal laughed at his brio, and was soon lost.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's method of psychiatry is actually nothing at all like real world contemporary psychiatry - from what we see of him in book/show canon he spends most of his time in talking therapies (which is way more helpful for his passion of fucking around with people's lives) like a psychotherapist/psychologist would. So actually, in the real world, Will's mother would be pro-psychotherapist and anti-psychiatrist - but in the Hannibal-world his """"unconventional""" style is right up her street.

Also, in case it's not clear to new readers, Hannibal and Jack know each other distantly and professionally.

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The few parking bays for visitors were spread out over some thin, gravelly grass. The rental car's air conditioning was quiet and a ticking sound was audible as the engine cooled, an unfamiliar noise which increased Will's discomfort. He missed the Bentley's safe embrace - a startling thought whilst waiting here, in the vicinity of his mother's trailer.

He glanced at Hannibal beside him. "We're early," Will said. "No harm in staying in the car a minute."

Hannibal said nothing; his expression was mild and his attitude was one of understanding. He unclipped his seatbelt and waited.

"I still haven't worked out what to say," Will said. "Or how. Do I just come out with it straight away? Or should we go inside and get settled first? Let her get to know you a bit."

He'd been thinking of nothing else for two weeks straight, ever since he'd called his mom and told her about Hannibal. There was someone he wanted her to meet, he'd said. Could they come down for a visit? He'd told her as much as he could over the phone - Hannibal's age, his situation, his background. Will had explained why he'd waited a year to mention him and his mom had listened, sometimes with patience, sometimes with disbelief, until everything had been said. Everything, that was, except that they'd impulsively got married whilst on vacation. Will hadn't been able to get that part out over the phone - it had to be done in person. It was only right.

Hannibal took his hand and squeezed it. "When you're in front of her you'll know exactly what to say," he said. "And you won't be alone, either. It will be difficult but, in the end, it will be fine."

"And next you're going to say that there's nothing to be gained by delaying and I'll feel better once it's over with." Will heaved a heavy sigh and clicked the car door open. "Better face the music, I suppose."

Hannibal got out too, giving Will an encouraging look over the roof of the car. Will smiled faintly back. He felt sick with nerves but turned and led the way.

Their crunching footsteps over the gravel seemed inappropriately loud. Outwardly, the park was still - the doors of a few trailers stood open but there was no one around outside. Inside, though, there would be activity and interest. The community was tight-knit and a strange car would attract attention, especially a top of the range Chrysler. And once Will had been recognised - in the company of an unknown man, one who was impeccably and expensively-dressed - the place would be buzzing with curiosity.

"It's this one down here," Will said. "Next to that tree."

Without meaning to, he slowed and stopped. Nothing seemed to have changed: Jackson's red pickup was still parked on the grass; Mrs Delford still persisted with her trellis of struggling roses. He could've been walking home from school, bag heavy with books, to let himself in to get on with his assignments in peace. He'd always enjoyed the quiet then, which had lasted only until his

mother got back from the store, or the diner, or wherever she was working at the time. The silence at his dad's was lonelier; here at his mom's it somehow meant security and freedom. Standing outside now, Will recognised it as happiness, and such an easy kind that he'd taken it entirely for granted.

Hannibal touched his elbow gently, rousing Will from his thoughts. At the same time the door to his mother's trailer opened. Suddenly there she was, standing on the porch, surrounded by plants and trailing greenery. She had her arms folded and her hip cocked like she used to when he came home late, after he'd got lost in a book or decided to walk the three miles home instead of getting the cramped and noisy bus. She'd never once scolded him for it.

A smile hit him so hard he thought he might cry. Will ran the few yards between them and scooped her up in his arms.

"Well, well," she said, exactly like she'd done when he was little. "The wanderer returns."

She felt small in his arms; small but not fragile. She was smiling when he put her down. She looked older than he remembered, though it had only been a few months since he saw her last. He had her eyes and her hair - his dad always said he took after her, especially when he was mad with Will.

"Hi Mom," Will said, beaming at her.

It was her turn to hug him, brief and bone-crushing. Will laughed in pure joy.

Then she pulled back, gave Will a rapid searching glance, and jerked her head questioningly in Hannibal's direction. He was standing a respectful distance away, where Will had left him, looking incredibly mild and unassuming.

"I think you'd better introduce us," she said, with a highly arched brow. "Don't you?"

*

His mom held the screen door open and they both filed inside. Will looked around the familiar kitchen-diner, with its marble-patterned worktops and faded paint, and wondered if he was going to get that scolding after all.

He waited for her to shut the door and join them before he said: "Mom, this is Hannibal."

She gave a curt nod; all her attention zoomed in on Hannibal and his excessively polished appearance. She took everything in, from the tip of his shoes to the sweep of his silvering hair.

"Hannibal," Will said, courage failing a little. "This is my mother, Constance."

"It's a very great pleasure to meet you," Hannibal said, extending a hand. Will didn't know how he did it: every word flowed easily and sincerely, even in the face of his mother's terrifying scrutiny.

She glanced suspiciously at Hannibal's hand but shook it briefly. Will could see she was reserving judgement.

"Call me Connie," she said. "Would you both like some tea?" She moved off, towards the refrigerator, busying herself with the necessary hospitalities. *Playing for time,* thought Will.

He glanced uncertainly at Hannibal. Hannibal gave the minutest shrug which Will translated as *better rip the band aid off*.

“Wait,” Will said. “We’ve got something to tell you first. Maybe you should sit down?”

Her hand paused at the cupboard where the glasses were kept. She dropped it and spun to face Will.

“I knew it,” she said, slamming the counter with her palm. “God*damnit.*” She stared rigidly down at her hands, the muscles in her arms twitching. Slowly, she let out a breath and folded her arms. “Come on, Will,” she said. “Out with it. What was it you came here to tell me?”

Will steeled himself. “We got married,” he said quietly. “About three weeks ago, when we were on vacation. We didn’t plan it but we discovered it was something we both wanted. So we, er- We went ahead and did it.”

There was a deep silence. Even the kitchen clock seemed to have stopped ticking.

His mom slowly turned her back on him, arms still tightly crossed. She was shaking her head from side to side.

“How could you not learn anything from my mistake?” she said, after a long pause. She was looking out the window.

Will briefly shut his eyes. “It’s not like that,” he said. “It’s different. *Really.*”

“I can’t believe this,” she said, now pacing up and down. “You’re so young. And so clever. You wanted to go to school, to get away from here, to learn and grow, but before you’ve hardly begun, you’ve thrown yourself away-”

She broke off with a sob, her hand at her mouth. Hannibal was stood attentively at Will’s elbow, quiet and polite, letting the scene play out in front of him. He looked entirely unaffected, sympathetic even.

“I’m sorry,” she said, quickly turning to Hannibal. “This has nothing to do with you, you know - it’s nothing personal. I knew after Will called out of the blue, all in a rush to come home and introduce you. I knew it. It’s the only thing Will wouldn’t tell me over the phone. I thought to myself, well, neither of them can be pregnant so they must be engaged.” She glared at Will. “But I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to actually run off and do it.”

Will dug his nails into his palms - it helped distract him a little from his mother’s anger. He looked nervously at Hannibal. “My mother doesn’t really believe in marriage,” he said. “I probably should’ve mentioned that earlier. Sorry.”

“Ah,” Hannibal said, softly and distinctly, just as Will threw his dignity out the window and started pleading for forgiveness.

“It’s my fault for springing it on you like this,” he began. “If we’d come sooner, if you’d met Hannibal before, th-”

But Hannibal had come forward. His hand lay firmly on Will’s shoulder and he was speaking to Will’s mother.

“I understand your feelings perfectly,” he was saying. “It’s been a great shock and for that I am particularly sorry. We both are. May I suggest I leave you both to talk for a while - that way you can say whatever you like about me without worrying about causing offence. I can take a walk around the neighbourhood. Or perhaps it’s better for me to go back to the motel and we can begin again tomorrow.”

Will’s surprise silenced him completely. His mother was silenced too, but she recovered quickly.

“No,” she said, “it’s fine. Stay. You came here with Will and-” Her eyes filled with tears and she angrily wiped them away. “Some time alone is a good idea but a walk isn’t going to occupy you for long. There’s the porch? It’s more comfortable than it looks, and it’s shaded and private…”

Hannibal smiled a very soft and understanding smile. “That’s very kind,” he said. “Thank you, I may just do that but I think I’ll stretch my legs first. It was a long drive from the airport.”

He left with a gracious sort of bow and closed the door softly behind him. The silence in the kitchen thickened uncomfortably.

“I just wanna-” Will said to her, gesturing at Hannibal’s retreating shadow.

She nodded, tight-lipped, and Will rushed out after him.

“Hannibal!”

Hannibal was halfway down the steps. He paused to turn and Will dived straight into his arms.

“You should consider changing careers,” Will said. “You’d make a great hostage negotiator. You could talk anyone down.”

“And *you* really should have mentioned your mother’s feelings about marriage earlier,” Hannibal said. But he didn’t let go of Will. If anything, he held on a touch tighter.

“I know,” Will said. “I’m sorry. And I’m sorry for all the painful scenes you had to witness. If I were you I’d stay away as long as possible so we can work through it properly before you get back.”

Hannibal pulled away, gracing Will with a glimmer of amusement. “A good bout of catharsis is all that’s required,” he said. “Keep it constructive, though. Try not to break anything.”

“Don’t worry, neither of us are crockery smashers,” Will said. “It’s more likely you’ll come back to a very clean kitchen and the smell of fried food than broken plates.”

Hannibal raised a questioning eyebrow.

“You’re in the south now, Hannibal. In times of trouble, we deep fry it and put sugar on top,” said Will. “Though we might end up having Pop-Tarts instead.”

“Painful scenes are hungry work.” Hannibal’s face was still but his eyes were warm.

He’s teasing me, thought Will. *Just like normal. Because everything’s going to be fine.*

He tightened his grip round Hannibal’s shoulders. “Thank you,” he said. “I think you’re shaping up to be a pretty good husband, you know.”

Hannibal paused. A flicker of tenderness passed over his face.

“I just hope my mom can see it that way.”

There was a strand of hair blowing loose across Will’s face. Hannibal tucked it back behind his ear and kissed him lightly. “Go back inside,” he said. “Don’t keep her waiting.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely stalling, aren’t I?” Will turned and looked doubtfully at the door. “Sure she doesn’t need a moment more?”

“Go back in,” Hannibal repeated, smiling now. “I won’t be far away.”

Will sighed and released him. “And if you do hear crockery smashing?”

“Then I’ll come running,” Hannibal said. “You can count on it.”

*

After Hannibal had gone, Will stayed sitting on the steps a few moments longer. He guessed he should be composing himself or trying to think of suitable apologies to make but his entire body was full of white noise and static. He let it buzz on, uninterrupted, until Hannibal’s long stride had taken him all the way down the road and he’d disappeared around the corner.

The trailer on the corner took his attention instead. It was different, somehow; newer, with fresh paint. And there was a car outside he didn’t recognise. Carly had lived there before but maybe she’d moved on. She was only a few years older than him - she’d had a young baby and Will had babysat for her a few times, not for money but just to help out. She’d been wanting to move closer to Baton Rouge where her brother was. Will remembered talking to her about it before he first left for Baltimore. That had been three years ago; now the baby would almost be ready for kindergarten. He hadn’t seen her on any of his visits since and until just then had forgotten she existed. It was a sad thought and he didn’t particularly like it. He hoped she was happy, wherever she was.

He stood and leaned out over the side to see if he could catch a glimpse of Hannibal’s pale summer suit through the trees beyond the fence. He’d wanted a walk, so Will had directed him to the stream which ran along the side of park. But nothing moved, so Will straightened up and reluctantly went back inside.

His mother was at the kitchen table, elbows planted firmly on its scrubbed surface and her chin resting on her hands. She looked up as soon as he came in. Will stopped dead; he had no idea what to do next, so he waited, hoping she’d cue him in.

Her face softened as she looked at him. “Come here,” she said, patting the seat next to her. “Sit.”

Will sat, gingerly at first, but she swept him into a hug. Over her shoulder, pressed into her familiar scent, his eyes filled with tears. He squeezed her tightly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “What I did was really selfish, I know that. I’m sorry.”

She pulled back. “Love makes us selfish,” she said. And, said with a deep, almost angry frown: “You do love him?”

Will nodded fervently. He couldn’t speak.

She watched his face, studying it for truth. “Hmmmn.” It was the sound of some of her ire relenting. “Of course you do.” There was a pause; Will looked at the tabletop and his mother looked at him.

“I’m still not happy about this,” she said. “About any of it. But it’s already happened so I guess we’ve just got to deal with it.”

Will clutched gratefully at her arm and opened his mouth to speak.

“But first,” she said, before he could get any words out, “just tell me why. Why get married? Why get married *at all*?”

Will sighed. That was a big question, one he’d asked himself several times without alighting on a satisfactory answer. *I saw a bride who looked like me and it felt like the universe had asked me a question. We had an argument and I got jealous of the past he’d had before me and the future he could still have without me. We were on holiday and the sea told me to.* All of it was true; none of it was the whole truth.

I wanted to, so we did, he thought. That was much closer to it.

“I don’t know what answer I can give you which you’ll accept,” he said. “I realised if I was going to marry anyone it would be him and after that there didn’t seem much point in waiting.”

“Oh *Will*.” She shook her head, slowly. Her gaze still weighed heavy but it was more forgiving than it had been.

“I know it’s risky,” he said. “I’m not stupid. But it’s a risk worth taking.”

She pursed her lips and stared at him. Her fingers twitched for the cigarettes she gave up ten years ago.

“It’s not like you and Dad,” Will said. “It isn’t. Really. And I haven’t ‘thrown myself away’. I’m still going to do all the things I was going to do before I met him.”

She sighed then, deeply. “I know,” she said. “I was mad when I said that. Mad and shocked and pissed at your old-enough-to-know-better fancy-looking husband.”

“In his defence, he wasn’t in possession of all the facts. Be pissed at me, not at him.”

“Unless you told him you were an orphan all alone in the world I get to be pissed at both of you.” Will accepted this in silence and she swung round in her seat to face him. “You’d better tell me more about him.”

“What would you like to know?” Will asked. “You’ve had the main highlights.”

“The things I really want to know I’m going to have to observe for myself,” she said. “I don’t know where to start… Is he as fancy as he looks?”

Will snorted. “A lot depends on what you see - Hannibal is pretty much exactly what he looks like as long as you look deep enough.”

“I’m gonna take that to mean pretty fucking fancy.” She sighed and Will didn’t contradict her. “He does the same thing you do,” she said thoughtfully. “Distract with a lot of surface stuff to keep the

wrong sort of people out."

"I don't do that," Will said, surprised. "Do I?"

"You know perfectly well that you do," she said. "When you're fiddling with your hair in the mirror, or touching up your face, do you ever stand back and really look at yourself? If you dazzle everyone you meet with your pretty long eyelashes and rosy cheeks, no one can get near enough to criticise."

"Oh, people still manage to do that," Will said. "Trust me."

"I don't mean those idiots," she said. "I mean everyone else. A beautiful face is a useful thing to hide behind."

Will flushed. He couldn't remember that she'd ever described him as beautiful before. He liked it and he also didn't like it; her accusation was a little too true.

She looked smugly at him and his expression. "I always knew you were going to break hearts," she said. "Even more so after you took to makeup because I knew that anyone who was going to fall for you was gonna fall hard. Whenever you came home from school, I always imagined a little band of adoring fans trailing behind."

Will frowned, exasperated. "Come on Mom, you know school wasn't like that. *At all.*" For emphasis he looked round for the 'fans' his mother's imagination has conjured. "And I don't see anyone now."

"No," she said. "Fans are far too shallow for you. You brought home a husband instead."

Will's mouth fell open; for a second he was genuinely speechless. "I see you're still mad," he said. "That's okay, I guess I deserve it. But I thought we were talking about Hannibal, not me."

"Oh yeah, I'm still mad," she said matter-of-factly. "Tell me about him, then. Start with his family - do they know about all this?"

Will allowed himself a little flutter of relief - at least this was something they could discuss without arguing. "He doesn't really have any," he said. "His parents died when he was young and so did his baby sister. There was some kind of accident, a crash or something. He doesn't talk about it much. The only other family he had was an uncle, who lived in Paris. He died a little while after Hannibal went to live with them - a heart attack. After that Hannibal lived alone with his aunt, until he went to medical school and she went back to Japan. She died too, about five years ago."

His mom raised an eyebrow. "A tragic backstory."

"He didn't open with all that, you know," Will said. "Hannibal isn't the tragic type."

She raised both eyebrows this time. "What did he open with?"

"He didn't," Will said. "I did the opening. But, after what you just said about me bringing home a husband, that probably doesn't sound how I'd like it to."

She looked at him steadily, like she could see straight into his brain. Was that what he did to people? He hoped not - it was extremely irritating.

“I haven’t been trawling Baltimore for a rich husband, *Mom*. You know very well I haven’t. Unless I’ve changed beyond all recognition?”

There was a pause; his mom sighed deeply and her shoulders slumped. “I know,” she said quietly. “It’s just a hell of a lot to take in. You seem… different somehow.”

“I just liked him,” Will said, in a small voice. “I went to meet him for a college thing and I liked him and I liked the place where he works. I felt good there, he made me feel good. I didn’t expect to end up married to him.”

“I can’t believe you got married,” she said, and it came out like a moan. She put her face in her hands and this time stayed there.

“Me neither,” Will said. He paused, biting his lip. A lump rose in his throat; he tried to swallow it away but it didn’t work. He wiped away a tear and reached for her, closing his fingers around her forearm. She moved, gripping his hand and squeezing it but she didn’t uncover her face.

“I wish you’d been there,” he said. “I know it’s no use me being sorry now but it’s true.”

She looked up. She wasn’t crying but her face was crumpled as if she had been.

“I’ve got some pictures?” Will offered.

“Yes,” she said. “But not now. I can’t… Later.”

Will nodded. He squeezed her hand one last time and went to pull away but she held on.

“Did he give you this?” she asked. She was looking at his rings, at the snake ring. “Is it an engagement ring?”

Will watched her warily. She was peering at it closely, studying it. “Yeah, I guess you could call it that.”

“A man like that, I thought it’d be diamonds or something,” she said, almost to herself. “Big ones.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be an engagement ring,” Will said. “Not exactly. It was something he was going to give me anyway but then all… *this* happened and, well. Diamonds aren’t really me. So this is what I have instead.”

He paused but she didn’t speak. She was waiting; she knew there was more to be told. Will screwed his courage up, deciding he’d get it all over with in one go.

“The snake is a family emblem, it’s on his family crest,” he said. “They had a big estate, somewhere in eastern Lithuania. Aristocracy, that sort of thing, but it’s all gone now. Hannibal’s technically a count.”

He saw her expression flicker with something like surprise but she didn’t comment. She just continued with her study of the ring. “An ouroboros,” she said. “Interesting.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“Did you *want* me to be mad about that?” she said, shrugging her shoulders carelessly. “He would’ve had a title and an estate, but he doesn’t. The money he’s got, he’s earned. Did I miss

anything?"

Her tone was a little too satirical for Will's comfort. "He's not a rich asshole, if that's what you mean," he said hotly.

"I didn't say he was," she said. "And I like that ring. It's much better than diamonds."

Something dawned on Will, something he'd hoped might happen but not so soon. "You like him," he said. "Don't you? Come on, admit it." He was grinning now, wide and happy, leaning closer to her. It was such a relief. "I can live with you being mad at me so long as you like him."

She refused to answer, shaking her head as if shaking off flies. But Will could see it there anyway, in her face and in her posture.

"I think he's interesting," she said, and that was all she would say.

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Hannibal took some time over his walk. He felt no anxiety over the difficulties with Will's mother - once the initial struggle had spent itself all would be well. And even if it wasn't, there was no danger to his peace of mind. He would travel home with Will either way.

Constance, he thought with a smile. It was a pleasant name, one of the more subtle virtues. It went well with her soft brown hair and challenging gaze; Sargent would have painted her very properly. The irony of it suited her, too. He liked it and found he liked her as well.

Her resemblance to Will was more than superficial - they shared mannerisms, a common outlook. Already he had detected in her the origins of Will's cynicism, the crucible where it had been formed and shaped. Hannibal looked forward to the time when he would be taken into her motherly confidence and hear the family stories which would be as revealing as they were trivial. But that must come later - at present there were other things to occupy him, like the path he was following by the stream.

In truth, the woods Will had directed him to were little more than a straggling patch of trees squeezed between farmland and the park fence. Depending on the meanderings of the path, glimpses of a regimented field intruded, its blank and spreading greenness looming under the sky, destroying much of the mystery of the trees. A muddy sort of stream veered away and back from the path, its edges blurred with marshy grasses. It was small and in its own way quaintly pretty, but a far cry from the primordial wildness of the bayou.

That Will craved wildness, wilderness, timelessness, whether small or large, was obvious to Hannibal. Here it was small - painfully so. Hannibal pictured him as a boy, as he would erroneously have been labelled then, seeking out adventure, alone and perhaps with other children, in this mean approximation of his homeland. Wider knowledge of it would have sprung from his father, who, with his boats and his travel, would have seemed worldly to the young Will. But it was here, in these small grubby places, where Will had found the essence of himself.

The grubby places in Hannibal's past shared little with Will's. His woods had been vast and their adventures abruptly curtailed, but Hannibal had found his essence early and kept it safe in the dark heart of himself. It was only later that he'd been able to let the light wake it.

Were there predators in these woods? Most likely not, Will had said, but he'd still warned Hannibal to be careful. *Water's not really deep enough for gators,* he'd said. *But you never know, sometimes they find themselves upstream. Just keep a lookout.*

He came to a space under a wide and shady tree, set upon a bank above the stream. The ground was flat and hard, burnished smooth with the tramplings of many feet. Hannibal stopped to crouch there, looking first down at the greenish water, and then up at the branches dividing overhead. Had Will sat here, perhaps when he'd grown older? When he'd found himself, when he'd asserted his right to put a name to it, but was still tentative and unsure of his way. Perhaps on the day his mother had bought him that first important set of underwear, worn defiantly under his jeans - cheap and girlish, rosebud-patterned, with a little pink trim around the top. It was a spot ripe for self-reflection, for fishing of a different sort.

Hannibal rose, touching a worn patch of bark on the tree before he took the path back to the park. Above, the wind blew in the trees and it sounded like the roaring of the sea.

Once he returned to the neatly-mown lawns and bright white trailers, Hannibal recalled Will's other warning. This one had concerned the interfering friendliness of the neighbourhood. *People will want to speak to you and they'll expect to know what you're doing here*, he'd said. *Who you're visiting and why - it'll have got round that we arrived together. Tell them whatever you think best.* He was almost disappointed when no one approached him. A curtain twitched but that was all. He settled down conspicuously on Constance's porch and waited but nobody appeared, not even under the guise of watering the plants. Perhaps they were waiting, just as he was, for the verdict to fall.

After a few minutes of silence and stillness, the door behind him opened. It was Will.

"Saw you when you came back but we were still talking," he said. "We're done now - want to try this again?"

Hannibal smiled at him. Will's eyes were a little red but his mood was buoyant, his tension dispelled. He grinned happily at Hannibal, holding open the door, his face broadcasting the success he wasn't yet sure enough about to speak aloud.

Hannibal stood and straightened his cuffs. "I'd be delighted," he said. He took Will's hand and followed him in.

With the shades drawn against the sun it was dark inside but only marginally cooler. The kitchen didn't smell of fried food but Will had been accurate in his predictions - there was an empty packet of Pop-Tarts on the counter.

Constance was at the table, far more composed, watching his entrance. The first thing she said was: "Are you hungry? We worked up quite an appetite and couldn't wait."

The table held two discarded plates littered with crumbs. By her left hand was a pack of playing cards.

"Please don't trouble yourself," Hannibal said, falling easily back into self-effacing gallantry. "I've caused too much disruption already."

She gave him a sharp glance. It reminded him strongly of Will and he checked himself. Too much charm would not be welcomed, would be grounds for suspicions he didn't want to stir up.

Constance picked up the cards and began to shuffle them, slowly, but in a deliberate and practiced manner. “I thought we’d been through enough together already to stand on ceremony,” she said. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Though comparative strangers, we find ourselves family.”

Hannibal smiled internally - this was more promising. He made a quick decision and seated himself at the table opposite her. Will appeared by his shoulder and began to set things down on the table - a jug of iced tea, three glasses, a bowl of peanuts.

“Strangers perhaps but I feel in familiar territory,” he said. “Will has told me much about you, about growing up here. I meant it when I said it was a great pleasure to meet you.”

Constance lifted the jug and began pouring out. “Unfortunately I missed out on the advantage of looking forward to our meeting, seeing as how I only heard about your existence a couple of weeks ago.” She threw a quick and angry glance at Will but it seemed to be mostly for show. Will greeted it with a silent sigh and took the seat next to Hannibal, chair squeaking on the floor. “I plan to make up for that now,” she continued. Her polite hostesses’ smile masked a challenge.

Will leaned in to Hannibal’s side. “Hope you’re ready for this,” he murmured, in an audible undertone, and, a little louder, “Mom and I came to the agreement that I’m still in trouble but you have a chance to come through unscathed.”

Constance’s eyes flicked between them, observing them together, weighing them up. “Will tells me you’re a psychiatrist now,” she said. “The mind is more interesting to you than the body?”

Hannibal leaned back in his seat and considered her more openly. Her face was still, almost gentle, but her mind was hard at work behind her eyes. He hoped she could read his pleasure at their conversation.

“It’s obvious where Will gets it from,” he said. “Yes, that’s accurate. Minds are more subtle, harder to fix and harder to break. Helping people understand themselves is a rewarding and worthwhile challenge.” He lifted the glass to his nose; it was scented richly with peaches, flecked with mint. It was good, not artificial. “This is delicious,” he said, and meant it.

Constance slid the pack of cards out into the middle of the table. “I help people understand themselves too,” she said. “Choose.”

Hannibal paused briefly, taken off-guard. Will met his eyes, faintly apologetic. Another detail had been concealed from him, apparently.

“Will has the gift as well,” Constance said. “He’s very good at it when he gives himself permission to be.”

Will’s sigh was no longer silent. “*Mom,*” he said, both in warning and complaint.

Constance ignored him, speaking directly to Hannibal as if Will wasn’t there. “That damn psychologist got in his head,” she said. “Telling him he had a disorder. My old grandmama would’ve spit in her eye.”

“Whatever he has, I consider it a gift,” Hannibal said. He tapped the pile of cards with a finger. “You’ll have to direct me,” he said. “This will be a new experience. What should I do?”

“Usually I’d need you to ask the cards a question,” she said. “But we’ll keep it simple, just a nice getting-to-know-you spread. Give them a quick shuffle and draw out nine cards. Lay them face-up in three rows of three, left to right and top to bottom.”

Hannibal did as instructed, shuffling and cutting the pack into three to choose the cards for each row. A card, the ace of spades, fluttered out during the second shuffle and lay upside-down on the table until he was finished. Will watched in a bored sort of way, more intent on his mother’s expression than in any meaning the cards might hold. All the time Constance’s attention was continual, something he felt rather than observed. The reading, he knew, had begun the moment he’d accepted the deck.

When it was done, he sat comfortably back and waited. Constance was quiet for a time, considering the spread, and he watched her work with quiet fascination. Will, of course, could’ve been excellent at this; with practice he would have been a master at cold-reading, at flattery and deception, made all the more convincing because he didn’t believe. If this was indeed the family art he’d been right not to indulge in it, whatever his mother thought. It would’ve devalued his gift, stripped him of its purity. He couldn’t deliver the kind of reading Constance gave - she respected the cards too much to cheapen them with showmanship.

Hannibal thrilled a little, for the first time fully understanding how serious this was. He sat for her, an open book, wondering if she recognised the language it was written in and, if so, how well she could read it.

“The rows represent your past, present and future,” Constance said, tapping her finger beside each one. “And the cards certainly haven’t held back on your past.” She met his eye and held it. “I heard about you being orphaned,” she said. “These spades are very clear - they point to death, separation, a life stage which is fractured and broken. The card which follows them is more difficult to interpret - hearts are the suit of love, of feeling, and the ace embodies that at its purest. But here it is inverted and, coming after those violent spades, something has been turned in on itself and lost.” She frowned, her eyes cast down at the cards, reaching for understanding. She looked so much like Will it was breathtaking. Then her frown splintered; she shook her head. “A loss of love, perhaps,” she said, even though she seemed to find that dissatisfactory, and turned to the next row of cards.

Despite the situation’s gravity, Hannibal smiled. He was pleased for her and her success; impressed with her skill.

“Now for your present,” Constance said. “Two hearts and a diamond, literally rosy. The jack of hearts in the centre is Will, without a doubt. But there are some warnings here. The first is minor, possibly even a rebuke to me. The two of diamonds to the jack’s left means gossip and disapproval over your love affair. The second is more complex… The eight indicates obsession, selfish love. Perhaps I should be concerned for Will but I feel it has more to do with the inverted ace above it. Something troubles you still, something carried over from your past. The final row may help us understand what might happen if you don’t let it go.”

Hannibal listened, entranced but growing increasingly easy. He was certain now that she saw nothing to trouble herself. Plenty of people carried something from the past which was damaging to them - it was the staple of his profession and likely of her’s as well. She wasn’t awake to anything sinister; she could not read his book like Will might have done had he been willing to take it seriously.

“Again, these first two are easy,” she said. “The nine of hearts is the card of wishes, and what you wish for is indicated by the card to its left. Speaking as your brand-new mother-in-law, what you desire is pleasing - love and happiness, second chances. You are seeking a new chapter in your life. But the final card is a warning-” she tapped the eight of clubs, looking him straight in the eye “-and possibly a strong one. It warns of crumbling foundations. Its position relates it to your past, it completes the story told by the ace and eight of hearts. And it sits in opposition to the wish card - if you want to fulfil your desires you should resolve whatever it is that you’re still carrying from your past. It’s outstayed its welcome and it’s time to say goodbye.”

Hannibal drew a breath, nodding over her words.

“Thank you,” he said, “for my first ever card reading. Maybe you’ll indulge me again someday?”

Constance laughed. “Oh I doubt that very much. I can tell you won’t ever let me near you with them again. What you’d like better is to watch me read for others.”

Hannibal laughed too, caught out and pleased about it. “Perhaps,” he said. “It was a touch unnerving. But I think we know each other a little better now.”

She smiled at him and gathered up the cards. Will stretched and yawned and, when Constance went into the kitchen for more drinks, shuffled closer to wrap an arm around Hannibal’s waist.

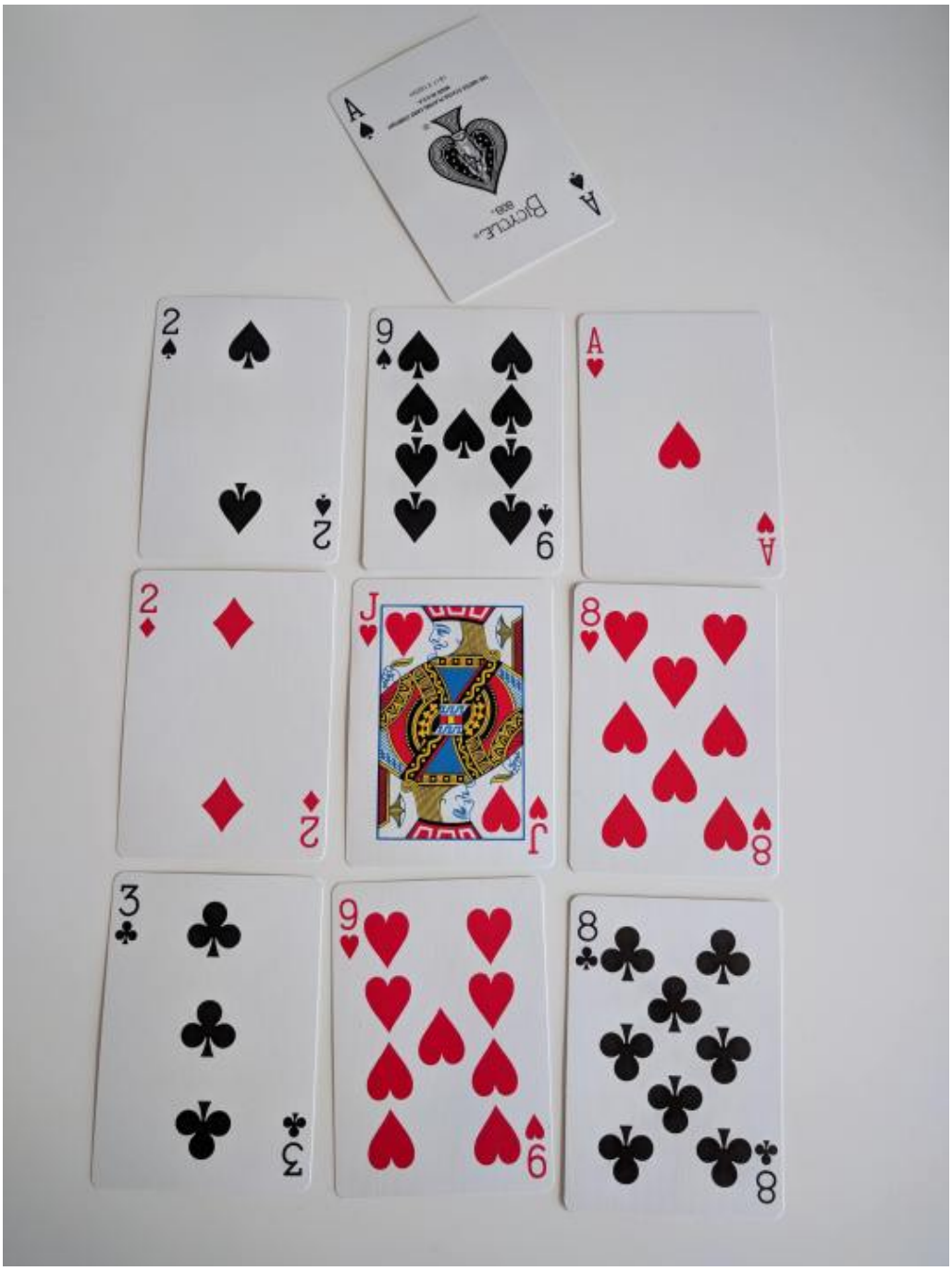
“Did I pass the test?” Hannibal whispered, receiving Will’s kiss with secret triumph.

“You passed the test,” Will said. “Thanks for doing that, it can’t have been fun.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Hannibal. “It had its moments.”

Chapter End Notes

I know very little about tarot through personal experience but I did do a lot of research to create the reading and develop Connie's approach to the cards, including her use of playing cards instead of a traditional tarot deck. Also, just in case I need to make it clear, Will's negative opinions on tarot do not necessarily reflect my own. I reverse-engineered Hannibal's spread so it told the story I wanted it to - I actually think it does a really good job!! - and here it is:



Finally, apologies to any Lithuanians reading for the oversimplification of Lithuanian history via Will's description of Hannibal's past. The show has shifted the events from the book canon from during/immediately after WW2 into contemporary history and, as a character, given Hannibal a very ‘out of time’ feel, which can present a few issues to fic writers. As you might have noticed, Hannibal's past has a role to play in this story, so I've tried to balance that as well as I can while preserving that unique, 'out of time', reality-bending undercurrent to the show.

And here is this fic on our tumblr and on twitter in case you'd like to share with your followers :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> I'll be sticking to the same posting schedule over the holidays - I've got everything ready and prepped to go so I can have a (mostly) uninterrupted two week (!) holiday. Wishing you all a peaceful and happy time <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The motel they were staying in was a thirty minute drive away. There had been few options to pick from and, to Will's surprise, Hannibal had chosen a no-frills motel room with kitchen facilities over the Hilton Express another twenty minutes down the interstate. Apparently being able to cook his own food was far more important than the superior comforts of a mid-range budget hotel. For much of the journey down Will had teased him about it, playing 'would you rather' and learning that even an upgrade to a fully-fledged Hilton wasn't enough to cause him to abandon the precious motel kitchen - location was paramount.

"There would have to be a choice of good restaurants nearby," he'd said. "Hotel ones are usually abominable, except for the very best, and even then nothing is guaranteed."

So, as Hannibal couldn't be expected to subsist on diner food alone, the Crescent Garden Motel had won his business. Incredibly, he'd brought along a picnic hamper stocked with plates and silverware and napkins - it looked immaculate and Will guessed it had been bought specially for their trip - and on the drive from the airport they'd stopped off for supplies. Hannibal had a talent for sniffing out quality produce no matter where he found himself, so somehow they'd arrived at the motel with a trunk stuffed with artisanal bread, locally-butchered meats and fresh organic produce. At dinner the previous night the picture had been completed when Hannibal had whipped out a bottle of wine, which had travelled from home wrapped up in towel in his luggage. *"Unbelievable,"* Will had sighed, but he'd accepted a glass all the same.

Now he was lying in bed, watching Hannibal cheerfully cook breakfast in his very unlikely setting. The decor was mostly brown and beige, the kitchen sad and poky - but the table under the window was laid with a brilliant white cloth, set with porcelain plates and sparkling clean glasses (the ones supplied by the motel were cloudy from the dishwasher). There probably would have been flowers if the motel had lived up to its name - the 'garden' was a flowerless pierce of turf, optimistically dotted with picnic tables.

Will flung the sheets aside and sat up. "I'd forgotten how hot it gets," he complained. The room's air-con was thunderously loud, too old to be effective, and Hannibal had switched it off the moment he'd risen. "How can you stand to do that?" There was something frying in a pan: sausages, judging by the smell.

"It doesn't take long," Hannibal said complacently. He was completely at ease - cooking always soothed him and here was hard evidence that the cause wasn't simply being in his own perfectly-designed kitchen.

Will flopped down again, silently arguing with the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. It seemed ridiculous to be lying in bed, waiting for breakfast to be served, but he also knew that Hannibal liked doing it. At Hannibal's house it felt natural but here it was out of place. *He* felt out of place.

"Guess I'm not accustomed to the heat any more," he said, studying the slow movements of ceiling fan. "That first winter in Baltimore I thought I was going to die of cold. Had to get a winter coat - I'd never had one before, not a proper one. It was almost spring again by the time I had enough money, so I just wore lots and lots of layers and put on a giant hoodie over the top."

Hannibal waited a little before answering. Will could feel his eyes resting on him while the sausages hissed in the pan. "It must be strange coming home again," he said. Will smiled - he loved how well Hannibal could follow the dartings of his thoughts without needing explanations.

There came the sound of plates being moved, pans being scraped. The toaster popped. Breakfast was nearly ready. Will, glad of something to do, slipped out of bed and went to pour orange juice for them both.

When he sat down at the table, he said, "I always felt like an outsider so I guess I thought I wouldn't feel any stranger than usual."

He paused while Hannibal brought over breakfast - a large platter of sausages and scrambled eggs, covered with a hot plate, and plenty of toast. Will got up to help, fetching the coffee and butter dish. He was suddenly starving.

"Okay, this looks like a real breakfast," he said, piling his plate with eggs. "Sorry I made fun of you for wanting to stay somewhere with a kitchen."

"No, you're not." Hannibal smiled indulgently and took a sip of coffee.

It took Will a moment to realise that Hannibal was waiting for him to continue. He gave a half-shrug and said, "I mean, I have been back for visits before," he said. "But this time… I don't know. In every corner I look I see how much I've changed - even mom mentioned it. It's weird."

Hannibal set his cup down and selected some toast. "Change is a constant," he said. "It's normal, inevitable, sometimes even to be desired. Did you crave change when you left?"

Will sighed. "Yeah," he said. "But I also wanted everything to stay exactly the same. Conflicting desires, I guess."

Hannibal regarded him seriously, his attention split between Will and his own internal thoughts. Sunlight glowed around the edge of the drawn blind; though it wasn't particularly early the room was dawn-like, dim but golden. Strands of Hannibal's hair shone brightly and the light struck the mouldings of his face like gilt. Will ate slowly, watching him think, but Hannibal said nothing further.

"I didn't picture our honeymoon like this," Will said, suddenly aware of the passing of time. It had been a month, almost to the day.

"You pictured our honeymoon?" Hannibal's brows had crept up, a disbelieving smirk poised at his lips. "I'd written off the idea - you were very insistent about not making a fuss."

Will was annoyed with himself, feeling he'd exposed something he hadn't quite been ready to expose. "Whatever I pictured, it didn't involve a motel, my mother and her telling your fortune."

Hannibal must've judged it better to let the subject drop. Instead of trying to find out what Will had pictured he asked, "Did she really teach you how to do it too? Or were you too stubborn to learn?"

Will chewed his toast, suspicious of this new line of questioning. "Come on, Hannibal," he said. "My mother's not here, you can be honest. You can't possibly believe in it."

"I was honest," Hannibal said, wholly unoffended at the accusation. "I found it interesting, especially as I'm familiar with your unusual intuition. The cards lent the experience an authority, a subdued theatricality."

Will's fork froze in mid-air. His suspicion solidified, dropping like a penny into a well. "You are *not* writing a paper on my mother."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Hannibal. "And it's not my specialism."

Will bit his lip, knowing he had to make his confession. "I already wrote one anyway," he said. "For my anomalistic psychology class last semester."

Hannibal's eyes widened briefly; he laughed. "Oh dear me."

"I know," Will said. "It's terrible. I'm a terrible disappointment and a terrible child. But it was just for school so I convinced myself it was okay. I would *never* do anything like that. Not on my own mother."

"Of course you wouldn't," Hannibal said. "But you didn't answer my question."

"What, can I read the cards?" Will said. "I suppose, yes. And no, I'm not reading your fortune. You've just had one done, don't get greedy." He stabbed a piece of sausage and jabbed it at Hannibal, eyebrow arched. "The cards don't like it."

"Don't they?" Hannibal said. "I wasn't aware the cards had feelings."

"Oh, they do," Will said. "Many. They particularly don't like being asked the same question over and over, almost as if they know repeat performances would only show them in a bad light."

Hannibal picked up his coffee again. "You don't like them much."

Will shrugged. "I don't see any real harm in it, as long as the person doing the reading has some sense and doesn't pitch too high or too low. It should be like a gentle therapy session - the cards are just there to help the conversation along."

"But you don't like doing readings yourself," persisted Hannibal.

"Bev persuaded me into it once for one of her Halloween parties and it got a bit too real," he said. "I have an unfair advantage and, even if it's just supposed to be a joke, people still hope, they *want* it to work. That's a dangerous combination."

"Would you say that the reading your mother gave was accurate?" Hannibal asked. "Did it match the meanings of the cards?"

Will frowned, a little surprised. “Accuracy is a difficult thing to define,” he said. “Card meanings vary, and people come up with their own as well - it’s encouraged. But broadly-speaking, yes, it was accurate. It was also fairly general and strongly coloured by things she already knew about you.”

“There was a card which fell out when I shuffled the pack,” Hannibal said. “The ace of spades. Would that have been significant to the reading?”

“Are you *actually* into this?” Will said, starting to laugh. “Maybe you could get your birth chart done next. Or, no, even better - how about a palm reading?”

“Does your mother do those as well?” Hannibal said, with an air of innocence. Then he smiled. “I’m trying to understand what role the cards play when you both have such extraordinary, and perfectly explainable, talents of insight.”

Will smirked knowingly. “And, if I won’t do a whole new reading for you, you want me to embellish the one you already got.”

“Humour me,” Hannibal said. “Just give me a little glimpse.”

Will sighed in a put-upon manner and relented. “It’s up to the person doing the reading to decide what's significant,” he said. “I don’t know if she used that card or not - none of the meanings are fixed, you see, they all shift, because it's not really about the cards, it's about the people sitting at the table, taking part. A card like that, which fell out and didn’t appear in the spread - it *could* be used to indicate something additional, to have an influence on the reading. Perhaps representing you or an aspect of you.”

Hannibal waited for more, so Will continued. “Mom calls it the Devil's card,” he said. “But I don’t think anyone else does. She says it’s the most difficult to interpret. It’s usually seen as negative - bad luck, misfortune, death and evil doings - but it has other meanings, ones to do with power and energy, will or force of being. It’s not necessarily a bad card and she didn’t give you a bad reading, so I’d say she interpreted it as suggesting complexity and maybe an unusual, even energetic, approach to life.”

Hannibal leaned across the table, mischief in his eyes. “Here’s another question,” he said. “Did you think it was a *good* reading?”

Stuffed full of delicious breakfast, Will put aside his knife and fork and settled down contentedly to his coffee. “I think my mother's happy and can now allow herself to like you,” he said. “So yes. It was the perfect reading.”

Hannibal chuckled quietly and raised his coffee cup in a kind of toast. “To the Graham family,” he said. “May I long be a part of it.”

Will grinned and didn’t reply. He was simply too happy to speak.

*

“You’re sure your father doesn’t mind?” Hannibal said, killing the engine and unbuckling his seatbelt. He sat unmoving in the driver’s seat, looking out at the little farmhouse. It had a shuttered look, even though the shutters weren’t actually closed.

“He suggested it,” Will said. “When I called to tell him about our visit, he said ‘*come by the house, let him see where you come from’.* He even said we could stay here instead of at a motel.” Will looked down at his hand; the snake’s eyes sparkled in the sunlight with the movement of his fingers. “It didn’t feel right, though, with him not knowing the full picture. But I figured lunch would be okay.”

He swung himself out of the car. Hannibal followed, stepping out slowly and looking around the yard. Everything was the same as Will remembered - *exactly* the same, like he’d left only a couple of days ago. Maybe time had been split, somehow, and there was a version of himself inside the house, looking down at them from one of the upper windows. The thought was a little unsettling.

“And Dad’s been gone weeks already so we’ll be doing him a favour by giving the kitchen a clean.” At Hannibal’s look, he said, “Don’t worry, it’ll be just as I promised - sharp knives, decent pans. It’s not fancy but he’s very fastidious and he knows how to cook. Who do you think taught me how to debone a chicken?”

“I have to admit I assumed that was your mother.”

Will laughed. “She *can* cook,” he said. “But only when she wants to. And she doesn’t often want to - you saw the Pop-Tarts, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Hannibal said, almost apologetically, as if he’d caught Will out in a minor sin and had been too delicate to mention it.

“Well, you’ll find no Pop-Tarts here, I can guarantee that.” Will bit down on his grin and held up the keys. “Shall we go in?”

Hannibal nodded his agreement but hung back, still looking up at the house. Will saw in his mind the version of himself which still lived there, gazing back at Hannibal. What would he be thinking?

“Which was your room?” Hannibal asked.

Will smiled to himself. “It’s round the back, you can’t see it from here. Come inside and I’ll show you it.”

Hannibal met his eyes; he knew he was being indulged and was pleased about it. “It’s a charming house,” he said, as he came to join Will. “The setting is good too, airy and just a little wild. A perfect setting for you.”

“It used to be a farm back when Dad was a boy,” Will said, leading Hannibal up the porch steps. “The land got sold off to bigger places and this is what’s left. Dad’s clung onto it ever since.” He stopped and looked out across the scrubby field. “The road’s closer than you think - the trees screen it from the house. And we’ve a neighbour too, just behind the barn. They keep an eye on the place while he’s away. So does Mom.”

Will turned and opened the door. It seemed dark inside after the bright sun and the air was hot and stale. He propped the door wide open and closed the screen while Hannibal made his cautious explorations around the living room. There was the large brick fireplace and a single armchair beside it; the bookshelves were filled with old car manuals and a smattering of natural history; a piano stood in the corner. Hannibal raised its dusty lid and pressed a finger to a key - it needed tuning.

“The kitchen’s back there,” Will said. “But I’ll show you upstairs first.”

Hannibal couldn’t resist a glance as they passed through it to reach the stairs; he gave it a greeting nod, perhaps silently telling it he’d be back to appreciate it properly later.

On the landing Will pointed at the closed doors. “Bathroom, my dad’s room, spare room - just a cupboard, really - and mine.” He opened it with a flourish and stood back so Hannibal could enter first.

It was smaller than he remembered but apart from that it was as familiar as his room back in Baltimore. It was drawn along similar lines as well - Will had thought his room now to have been a departure, something different to the past, but he saw with a small shock that it wasn’t. It was the same - the checked bedspread, the books in piles on the desk and floor, the collection of trivial objects cluttered into jars, boxes, drawers, shelves. The only difference was that his desk in Baltimore was a white painted dressing table which Bev had helped him drag in from a yard sale. That, and sentimental reminders of childhood were everywhere: picture books and toy cars; a National Geographic Atlas he’d got for his birthday and had pored over almost every day; his first fishing rod. He seemed to be confronted by something, an eternal truth about himself, which left him feeling very young and very old at the same time.

And there was Hannibal standing in the middle of it, respectfully looking around. Will blinked and the ghost-Will he’d left behind was watching from the middle of the bed. Hannibal passed by, the edge of his jacket brushing the bedspread. The ghost flinched away, frowning unhappily; it lifted its eyes to stare reproachfully at Will.

Will shook himself back to reality. “I’m gonna go bring the stuff in,” he said. “Stay up here as long as you like; I’m just not ready for all this nostalgia, it’s too much.”

Hannibal smiled. “Of course,” he said, kissing Will’s cheek. “You’re being very patient with me and I promise to cook you a nice lunch as a thank you.”

His manner warmed Will. The effects of his overactive imagination drifted away and he slipped off with a lighter heart. *It was only to be expected*, he told himself as he fetched the hamper in from the car. *Difficult conversations and too much talk of the past.*

Thankfully there were no ghosts in the rest of the house, only reminders of his dad and he was a man who didn’t hold truck with that kind of nonsense. He’d accepted Will’s strange empathy condition with the same sort of bemused, bluff practicality that he’d shown when Will had tried to explain what being genderfluid meant. He didn’t always get things right but he meant well, and Will suddenly missed him so much it was painful. He had to sit on the porch steps for a while, wiping his eyes and making stern promises that he’d come back and visit more often. It would easier, now that he had Hannibal. The idea of Hannibal paying for things like flights to visit his family didn’t seem so distasteful now they were married. Not now he was actually a part of it.

He was unpacking the hamper when Hannibal reappeared. He made straight for the food, mostly leftovers from their stay, and began to deal with them efficiently. But something solemn, almost dreamy, lingered in him.

“I would have liked to have served something more fitting,” he said. “Bouillabaisse, teeming with freshly-caught fish, the rouille spiked heavily with chili and garlic. A real fisherman’s pot.”

Will laid a hand on his arm, smiling. “I think you’re a little too heavily invested in my peasant origins. But I appreciate the thought.”

Hannibal laugh was rueful. “Perhaps I too am suffering from nostalgia. And the most pernicious kind: nostalgia for something I have never experienced and never will.”

“Did you find what you were looking for up there?” Will asked, imagining the ghost-Will and Hannibal each calmly taking the other in as the barrier of years between them dissolved.

Hannibal’s hands were busy, seasoning the tuna steak, slicing bread and chopping tomatoes; fingers dancing across his father’s things. “Your origins are as obscure as mine,” he said, meeting Will’s eyes. “I haven’t unravelled the whole story yet.”

For a moment Will was taken aback. He was used to Hannibal’s intense ways, even liked them, but he seemed to imply something beyond his usual meaning. Will found himself denying it, almost bashful.

“I don’t think there’s much else to see,” he mumbled, and went out to the porch to set the table.

Lunch was simple and, despite the lack of bouillabaisse, something of Hannibal’s rustic nostalgia hung over the food in a Provençal sort of way. There were no courses, only a table laden with dishes: baked melon and smoked ham, the leftover tuna steak from the previous night’s dinner with black olives and anchovies, yesterday’s bread toasted and rubbed with garlic, a tomato salad. Naturally, for dessert, there were grilled peaches. It was peaceful and Will ate happily, his self-consciousness gone. He liked being back in the country, where the sky seemed bluer against the brilliant green and the only sounds were whispering leaves and birds.

“I’ve missed this,” Will said, waving a fork vaguely at the scene in front of them. “Been in a town too long, with too many deadlines and not enough time away.”

“That’s something we could look at; something for the future,” Hannibal said. “A house in the country for weekends, at least to be begin with.”

Will found himself thinking seriously about this suggestion. “Would you really do that?” he said. “For me?” He knew Hannibal was essentially an urban animal; his hunting grounds were concert halls, art galleries and theatres. Visits to the country were one thing but the thought of him living there, even part-time, seemed implausible.

Hannibal smiled, shrugging easily. “It should be possible to arrange something suitable,” he said. “We needn’t renounce the city completely, and anyway, depending what kind of work you decide upon, you may not be able to. But if you desired it why not have a house both in the city and the country?”

Will marvelled a little at how easy money could make things which had always seemed insoluble. “It’s strange to think I have those kinds of choices now,” he said. “When I left for college I knew I’d have to leave one life behind me so I could take up another. I didn’t think I’d get to have both - definitely not so soon.”

“You know it gives me great pleasure to make you happy,” Hannibal said. And it was true - gratification shone out from him, suffusing him with a kind of glow. “Was it difficult to decide to leave? I imagine you realised your future lay elsewhere a long time before, perhaps when the psychologist was called in.”

Will toyed with a crust of bread, searching for the most honest answer he could give. “I always knew I was different but yeah - I think that was when it became something that actually mattered.”

“What was it which drew their attention to you?”

“Well…” Will gave a laugh, an abrupt one. “I mean, there were a few things. I used to experience, uh, *runaway feelings* - you know, things picked up from other people. I got in trouble a lot as a kid, it was hard to control my emotions sometimes. That was what really triggered it.”

“But there was something else?”

“Whenever I got in trouble in school the teacher would assume I’d been goofing off but then they’d discover I’d done all their assignments. Sometimes I’d come up with some of my own, to pass the time. Mostly, though, I’d be doing what they called ‘daydreaming’.”

“Only it wasn’t really daydreaming.”

“No,” Will said. “It was more like… assimilating. It sounds creepy, I know, but that’s what it’s like in my head sometimes - I just tune in like a radio and absorb.”

“And there’s a lot to absorb at that age,” Hannibal said. “How old were you? About nine, ten? A whole world of new experiences.”

Will nodded. “Anything and everything.”

“What did you do with all these new experiences?” Hannibal asked. “Where did you put them?”

Will grinned wryly and tapped his temple. “Assimilated,” he said. “For the important stuff, the good stuff, I have a stream.”

Hannibal leaned in a little closer, his interest strongly piqued. “A stream?” he repeated.

“I made it before I left, so I could always keep it with me.” Will was smiling more now, a true smile. “You saw it yesterday.”

The look of understanding which dawned on Hannibal’s face was wonderful. It shivered, faded, brimmed with reverence. Will took his hand and pressed it between his own, listening to Hannibal’s silence. He’d never shared that with anyone before and Hannibal had received it like a great and solemn gift.

After a moment, Hannibal said, “One day I would love to walk the paths of your mind with you. I hadn’t realised I’d already strayed there on my own.”

“I’m sure you took me with you in some form or another,” Will said. “But yes - when the time is right I know we’ll do just that.”

*

That evening they joined his mom; they were heading home early the next morning and she’d offered to cook. Now the drama was over Will found himself to be a little shy about having Hannibal and his mother in the same room together, especially as Hannibal had decided to broadcast his devotion with plenty of light, seemingly-unconscious touches. Once he brushed Will’s hair back from his ear and kissed it, making Will blush more furiously than he ever should

have over such a small thing; and the realisation of that made him blush even more. He'd never had anyone to introduce his parents to before - highschool had passed with barely a first kiss and a few vague teenage fumblings. He'd been the weird kid in one too many ways - whatever his mom had imagined about his time in highschool she'd been wrong. All of his experience had come at college - where he'd made up enthusiastically for lost time - and where he'd been too far away for awkward things like introducing boyfriends or girlfriends to his mom.

He wondered about Kyle, then; the guy with the football scholarship and a surprisingly sweet nature. He'd been really into Will - if Will had wanted, if he hadn't met Hannibal, then maybe that could've gotten more serious. What would his mother have made of him? He glanced at her - she was deep in conversation with Hannibal. Will saw her shape his name with her lips and hastily switched his attention off again. Would she have liked Kyle more or less than she did Hannibal? Looking at them both together just then, it didn't seem likely.

He blinked and a wine glass had been set down before him. Hannibal poured out a little wine and, unseen by his mom, gave him a wink. They were sitting side-by-side, both watching him with affection.

"He was always like this," his mom said, in a confidential tone. "Lost in his own world."

Will sipped his wine calmly - it was pink and fresh. "I was just trying to give you two time to talk. And to tune out whatever it was that you were saying about me."

The wine had been a gift of Hannibal's, presented with both apologies that he didn't know her preferences and promises that it would be good to drink in the evening heat. His mom had accepted it with a resolutely casual air, despite the fact that the only wine glasses she owned were mismatched and gathering dust at the back of a cupboard. This had set the tone for the evening: both Hannibal and his mom were determined to get along. Therefore, if it would help accomplish this, Will was content to play the stooge.

"I was just telling Connie we made her chicken," Hannibal said.

"You left out the cumin," his mom said. She turned to Hannibal. "Not too much, though. Just enough to get that bitter earthiness."

Will laughed, shrugging. "Sorry Mom," he said. "I got as close as memory could get."

"I thought your memory was brilliant?" she accused. "Genius-like?"

"Eidetic memory is visual, like a photograph," Will said patiently - his mom didn't care for any of the labels the psychologist had furnished him with, no matter how flattering. "And anyway, I don't have a palate like Hannibal's so I was bound to mess up."

She looked with interest at Hannibal; it was almost another challenge. Hannibal modestly said nothing for or against the prowess of his palate.

"He has a heightened sense of smell," Will said. "A *very* heightened sense of smell - we're both freakish in different ways."

Hannibal laughed. "I'm afraid it's true," he said. "Once I was able to detect that a patient had stomach cancer because of it."

His mom laughed with him. “What a strange superpower to have,” she said. “I’m almost afraid of you now - you must learn so much about people without them ever being aware of it.”

“I try to only pay attention when it matters,” Hannibal said. “Any unnecessary intrusion would be rude of me.”

“And what do you find *does* matter?” she asked, grinning still. “Generally speaking, of course.”

“Apart from the great facts of life or death?” Hannibal said. “Well, what is left? Only the pleasures - food, wine, music.” He leaned closer to her and said, “I would also like to add love to that list but I think it would embarrass Will too much.”

“And yet you added it anyway,” Will said. “So you might as well carry on.”

“Poor Will,” his mom said. “I wonder if we’ve teased you enough? How did you get along at your dad’s place yesterday?”

“Fine,” Will said. “I showed Hannibal around and we had some lunch.”

“It’s a lovely spot,” Hannibal said. “It made me realise how suited Will is to the country - we talked about getting a place somewhere more rural to spend our weekends.”

“Lovely it might be but that barn needs repairing,” his mom said darkly. “Next storm we have I’m sure it’s going to collapse.”

“It looked okay to me,” Will said. “And I should know - I helped Dad put it up.”

“Speaking of, when are you going to tell him about you two? Because if he asks me how your visit went - and he will, sooner or later - I’m not going to lie and I’m not going to omit anything, either.”

“Yes Mom, I know,” Will said. “I’ll call him as soon as we get back.”

“If it could wait a week or two we could arrange to visit him,” Hannibal said. “Would that help?”

Both Will and his mom shook their heads.

“When Billy is working it’s best to stay clear,” she said. “It’s a busy time and he’s a man of few words anyway. Just do him the courtesy and then you can meet when he’s got room in his head to greet the situation properly.”

Her mention of ‘the situation’ caused Will a tug of anxiety. It was hard to guess how his dad might greet the news - he might be angry, extremely so, or he might quietly tuck away a hard nugget of resentment to keep for later. But there was a chance he might be pleased that Will had done something as conventional as getting married, if only he could overlook the unconventional way he’d gone about it.

After dinner, Will grabbed a few minutes with his mom while they cleared away. Hannibal, intuiting what Will wanted, went serenely outside to enjoy the last of the wine in the night air.

“Well?” Will asked his mom quietly. The walls of the trailer were not thick and voices carried easily in the humid air. “What’s the final verdict?”

She paused for a moment, twisting a dish towel in her hands. “He’s a curious one,” she said, but it wasn’t a criticism. “It’s obvious he’s in deep with you.”

“What about us being married?” Will asked. “How do you feel about that now?”

She sighed deeply. “Oh *marriage*,” she said disparagingly. “I don’t know - it’s not just about loving someone, it's the shape their love takes. That’s what you’ve got to pay attention to. Your father still can’t understand that - he can’t see that that was what I couldn’t live with, being all fenced in and constricted.”

Will thought about this while he stacked the plates back into a cupboard. His muscle memory was perfect; without thinking about it he knew exactly where to lay his hands on anything he could need from the kitchen, but in other ways knew himself deeply changed.

“When I think about Hannibal’s love I think of a great sea,” he said. “One with deep dark depths and a sparkling surface.”

His mom stopped and gave him a forthright look. “Sounds dangerous,” she said. “Ever think you might drown?”

Will shook his head, still thoughtful. “The water is buoyant,” he said. “I can swim in it easily.”

She nodded, face still sharp, but drew Will into brief hug. “I’ve one more question,” she said, releasing him to hang the dishtowel using back up. “A very important one, make or break.”

Will smiled to himself. He knew her habits and was pretty sure he knew what was coming next. A final test and Hannibal was going to ace it.

She opened a corner cupboard and brought out a tin, which she brandished at Will. “Is he going get funny about me rolling a joint?”

Will grinned. “Let me tell you a little story about Hannibal and his greenhouse,” he said, as they went out onto the porch together.

Chapter End Notes

Eidetic memory is the term Harris uses in *Red Dragon*, though the way Will's memory seems to work points to a photographic memory instead - I stuck with it here to fit with the book. Similarly, I have no idea if it's even feasible for someone to travel around fixing boats for a living now, but as that’s how Will spent his childhood with his father in the book, the same is true in my fic.

You can read about Will's relationship with Kyle here and here (these are prob two of my top fave QS fics, sorry Hannibal) and also here's the one about Hannibal and his greenhouse again.

If you enjoyed reading and want to share with your followers, here's this fic on twitter and our tumblr blog :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I think that went pretty well," Will said on Sunday night as they settled down in bed. "Don't you?"

They'd arrived back at Hannibal's a couple of hours ago, just enough time to eat and bathe and feel at home again. After the motel the house seemed enormous, with its deep rich shadows and substantial furniture. The bed too seemed vast, and as soft and enveloping as sleep itself. Cuddled up next to Hannibal, Will felt something leave him and a peace descend. Hannibal had done so much, put up with so much, over the past couple of days. He knew himself to be truly loved, cherished even.

Hannibal drew closer, slipping his arms around Will's waist. "I'm not going to say I told you so," he said. "But…"

He left his sentence hanging, preferring instead to push his face into Will's neck and nip the lobe of his ear. Will made a startled sound, his laugh came out high-pitched. Hannibal's face was close to his own, his grin wide, genuine and slightly crooked.

"I'm so relieved it's over," Will said, and sighed. And then, as if to prove his anxiety hadn't been unfounded, added, "It *could* have gone badly though."

Hannibal's expression turned a shade skeptical. "As a practiced observer of human behaviour, I doubt it," he said. "You have a healthy and affectionate relationship with your mother - the bond you have is strong. As a rule, people only entertain conflict when it's necessary. If something happens they don't like, once the initial flood of emotion has passed they usually gravitate towards acceptance. Your mother would be unlikely to be so angry that she would act in extremes. And I think, on some level, you knew that or you wouldn't have risked her censure in the first place."

Will blinked and, frowning a little, propped himself up on his elbow. "You make me sound calculating."

"Not calculating," Hannibal said. "I think you were subconsciously guided by your knowledge of your mother's character. You yourself said you thought our getting married would be a forgivable sin."

"I said I *hoped* it was," Will said. "But, hmmmn, I don't know. Maybe." He lay back down again while that played through his mind - but then stopped himself. It didn't matter now, everything was good and peaceful. He was home with Hannibal; his mom had said she liked him; she'd accepted the both of them, together.

"By the way, she really does like you," he said. "Apparently you're 'interesting' which is actually way more positive than it might sound."

A subtle warmth glowed in Hannibal's eyes and the lines of his mouth became even more proud than usual. He took up Will's hand and kissed the palm. "I suppose the two of you are just similar enough in taste and inclination," he said. "It was an honour to meet her and to glimpse your beginnings."

Will smiled, lulled by both the slow release of tension from his travel-sore muscles and by the simple fact of Hannibal's love. Their conversation drifted into silent touch, into the heat and solidity of bodies who knew each other well. Hannibal's kisses were slow and serious, and Will, flushed with a lazy content, fell into them, his mind thick with thoughts of how Hannibal was his forever. He thought idly of his body, too; of his quiet strength, his broad chest and lean muscle; the secret scent at the hollow of his throat, and the velvet softness nestled inside his briefs. He thought of reaching inside, of holding him in his hand and stroking him to hardness. He thought and he didn't act because at that moment it was more exciting not to. The knowledge that he could almost whenever he wanted was too powerful; a potential so potent it needed to be savoured. And also because he was tired, and wanted to fall asleep in Hannibal's arms exactly as he was.

The next morning Will woke to weak light filtering through the drapes and what seemed like acres of stiff muscles. Hannibal's side of the bed was empty - he was a light sleeper and tended to rise unforgivably early, especially on weekdays. Will stretched, feeling a pleasant protest in his back and calves, and then spread out with a sigh, revelling in spaciousness and cool sheets.

He had to get up and get back to his summer job - Professor Crawford had given him a couple of day's reprieve - but Will lingered a little more. Something at the back of his brain was nudging forward, a persistent itch; there was something he had to do. He groaned when he remembered and scrubbed roughly at his face. His dad; he had to call his dad.

Will forced himself out of bed and spent all of his ten-minute bathroom routine psyching himself up. It was just past seven thirty when he'd finished. His stuff was in the dressing room and his uncharged phone was at thirty-eight per cent battery. His dad probably wouldn't have started work yet so there was no time like the present.

He sat on the bench at the end of the bed while the call connected. When it started ringing he got up and paced around the room. It rang and rang; no one picked up. Will sighed in frustration, annoyed he hadn't forseen this. He was just deciding what to do when the generic answer phone message clicked on. Cursing under his breath, he left a quick message: "Hi Dad, it's me, I've got some news. Can you give me a call later?" He messaged his mom to let her know he'd tried and then sat for a few moments, looking warily at his phone, in case it buzzed into life and caught him off-guard.

It didn't, but Will still couldn't quite leave his phone alone. He opened his chat with Bev and messaged her instead: *ugh just tried to call dad and he's not answering. will be home after work later.* He waited for her to read it, skimming their last few messages as he did - the updates he'd sent on their trip, his worries, a sneaky picture of Hannibal at work in the motel kitchen; and her replies and jokes and encouragement - a link to a $500 jacket she couldn't afford, the news that Zeller had a secret girlfriend who was real and not imaginary and that no one yet had found out who she was.

maybe she's not a girl at all, Will replied to the last one - he'd long harboured suspicions about Brian.

Double ticks appeared next to his messages as Bev came online. *well jimmy seems disappointed so she must be. both of them should get their acts together.*

no, no, Will wrote back. *it's not going to happen like that. they'll have separate lives, zeller will prob have kids and more than one ex-wife, then they'll finally realise they're happiest together when they're ready to retire. like holmes and watson.*

did holmes and watson do that????????

some people think so. why don't you google it :)

omg i will, she said back, and followed it up with: *don't stress about your dad, you'll get to speak to him soon.* And: *if your mom was ok about it he will be too.*

Will paused a moment, trying to convince himself that was true. Even if it wasn't, it still made him feel a little better.

btw do you want to come here for dinner one night? he messaged again. *don't worry hannibal will be cooking, not me*

The replies came thick and fast.

fuck yes

but now i'm mad i haven't been asked before

wtf will we're practically family????

and he got to meet your mom too

i've never met your mom

i demand redress and reparation

what's he going to cook will it be something delicious

Will laughed out loud. *you can't seriously be jealous about my mom. and you'll meet her soon i think - i can already feel hannibal waiting to offer to fly her up.*

He glanced vaguely around the bedroom, at the Japanese prints and samurai armour. And - oh god - at the mirror over the fireplace which was angled for some very interesting views from the bed. *but fuck knows what she's going to make of this house,* he wrote.

omg yes, Bev replied. *the house!! i can't wait, pleeease let it be as nuts as you've hinted.*

*it's *not* not-nuts,* Will said. *idk i like it but not everyone would. a lot is in the details.*

Bev's only reply was a thumbs-up emoji and a gif of a badly Photoshopped cat dancing on its hind legs.

*

Will arrived just before nine to find the psychology department eerily quiet. Lots of the faculty were away, either on vacation or conducting fieldwork or giving papers at conferences. The atmosphere was library-like, hushed and golden in the summer sunlight and he rather liked it.

Joan was at her desk, yawning. "This heat makes me sleepy," she complained. "And the AC never works properly in here."

"Coffee?" Will said, stowing his bag away by the coatstand. "I could fetch you an iced one from outside." Joan was right - the day was turning warm and he had a longing to be out of doors, even if it was only to walk across the manicured lawn of the campus.

“Oh thanks but regular is more than fine,” Joan answered. “How was your weekend? Didn’t you go away somewhere?”

“Yeah, to visit my mom,” Will said. And, because he could see the next question forming on Joan’s lips, “She lives out in the country, north of New Orleans.”

Joan glanced up from her emails, her interest now fully caught. “I had no idea you came from down there,” she said. “You don’t have much of an accent.”

Will gave her a rueful, lopsided smile. “My accent is as fluid as the rest of me.”

He could see she didn’t really understand what he meant but she smiled kindly back regardless. “Did you go alone?” she asked, with imperfectly assumed innocence.

For a moment he was thrown into panic about what to say, instinctively reluctant to tell her the truth but unwilling to lie about it either. But then he reflected upon his situation and the weekend just past - his marriage to Hannibal was rapidly becoming public domain. His mom knew and almost approved; soon he hoped his dad would too. And, as he *was* married, shouldn’t he start acting like it? It seemed silly to wear the ring yet pretend there was nothing on his finger at all.

“Well…” he began. “Actually no I didn’t. My husband went with me - we got married recently and he hadn’t met her before.”

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, to Will’s surprise. “How did it go? Did she like him?” Her gaze darted down to his left hand and moved back up again. “We did wonder, Melinda and I, after we noticed your ring - but we didn’t want to pry. Was it a whirlwind romance?”

Her emails were entirely forgotten, her chair turned aside, body and attention both straining eagerly towards Will. She obviously wanted to pry now, but instead of feeling annoyed Will found himself choking down a laugh. There was no malice in her enquiries, and her enthusiasm and determination to find his story romantic was deeply flattering after the rather mixed response he’d received so far. He answered her questions unguardedly but decided to withhold any information which might identify Hannibal. It was possible that, through Professor Crawford, either her or Melinda might know his name; it might even have been one of them who’d contacted him to arrange their fateful meeting.

“Where’s Melinda today?” Will called, when he finally went to make coffee in the little kitchen just outside. “Is she sick?”

“No,” Joan called back. “It was so quiet on Friday that she decided to take a couple of days off. I might do the same at the end of the week.” There came a brisk rustling of pages as she turned to the notebook in which she recorded every detail of her working life. “Oh, I nearly forgot - there’s a message for you.”

Will came back carrying two cups and set one down on her desk.

“Lovely, thank you,” she said, taking a grateful sip. “Dr Du Maurier came in while you were away - she’d like to see you at two on Friday. Said you’re going to be helping her with a paper and that you knew all about it?” Her expression grew doubtful, and ever so slightly suspicious, but of what Will didn’t know.

“Yeah,” Will said. “Professor Crawford mentioned it a couple of weeks ago but then he went on vacation and I didn’t hear anything else. I was beginning to think I wasn’t needed after all.”

“Dr Du Maurier doesn’t grace us with her presence much,” Joan said stiffly. “But if you know about it, that’s okay - I just wasn’t sure.”

Will nodded. “Oh no, I know about it,” he said. “What I don’t know is anything about Dr Du Maurier. I don’t even know where her office is.”

Joan gave him a quietly assessing look but, instead of saying what she clearly wished to, she wrapped herself in a professional manner and gave Will the bare facts. Dr Du Maurier preferred to work from home but she had an office at the end of a quiet corridor which overlooked the gardens. She was an appointment of Professor Crawford’s; she rarely mixed with the rest of the department; she was, in Joan’s words, ‘no trouble, *really*’. But Will was left with the impression that she had some kind of special status and it was this that Joan resented. Later, out of curiosity, he passed by her office - the door was blank, without a name displayed on it. And it seemed to have struck out on its own - the only room nearby was a bathroom and on the other side was a lonely stairwell, above which hung an emergency exit sign. It could almost have been a private entrance to a private office.

He hadn’t been home long when his phone rang. Will snatched it out of his bag: it was his dad. A quick glance round confirmed Bev wasn’t yet home but he ran upstairs to take it anyway. He really didn’t want to be interrupted.

“Will?” His dad’s voice sounded distant; he was outside, somewhere windy, and it was hard to hear him clearly.

“Hi Dad,” he said. “You okay?”

“Not bad,” came the cautious reply. “Got a shot thermostat and an old RM with engine hunt. She needs a complete refit really but there’s not the time, plus the parts’ll be hard to come by now. Shame, she could be a real beauty.”

Anyone else might’ve been checked at hearing this peculiar greeting but Will knew these were all the problems his dad liked to have best. He had a recurring fantasy of being able to get his dad a boat in time for his retirement - a good one, a classic one; one old enough to need constant tinkering to be in proper working order. Maybe, if he didn’t disown him completely after this phonecall, that might now stand a chance of actually happening.

“What’s this about news?” his dad asked. “What have you got to tell me?”

Will prepared himself with a breath and delivered the lines he’d mentally rehearsed. “Remember I told you I was going to see Mom last weekend because there was someone I wanted her to meet?”

“Yeah, I remember,” his dad said. “This boyfriend of yours.” Will could see him scratching his chin with an abrupt motion, alive to his surroundings, to the wind and air, to the flicker of light on water, and most importantly to the job he’d halted to return Will’s call. Will was only on the end of a phone; his dad was probably crouched by a boat which just then clamoured for all his attention.

“Yeah,” Will said, before his dad could get distracted and interrupt. “I’ve been seeing him for a while, over a year. I didn’t mean not to tell you both about him but that’s what happened - he’s older than me, see, and he’s kind of… unusual. Hard to explain. So I thought it would be best for

you guys to meet him in person. Except, we decided to get married while we were on vacation and ended up doing it there and then."

Having got the words out, Will came to an abrupt stop. There was nothing more he could say; he just had to wait and take whatever came.

The silence at the end of the phone continued for a long time. All Will could hear was the wind blowing in off Lake Eerie.

Then his dad sucked his breath in through his teeth. "So your news is you got yourself a husband, not a boyfriend?"

Will swallowed. "Er, yeah, I guess it is."

"And your mother's met him?"

"Yes sir, on Friday just gone."

"And what did she say?"

"She wasn't thrilled at first but she said she liked him. I didn't want to tell her over the phone, see; and if you hadn't been working we'd have come to visit you too."

"What's he do for a living?"

"He's a psychiatrist," Will said, with a growing sense of incredulity. He chewed his lip hard and tried to be patient.

"And you're happy?" his dad said suddenly. "He treats you right? Because I know not everyone understands your… you know."

"He's just fine about my 'you know'," Will said, biting down on his exasperation. "He wants to meet you as soon as he can and he wanted me to tell you he's sorry we didn't wait until he had."

"Hmmmn." There was another long pause. "What's his name?"

"Hannibal," Will said. "Hannibal Lecter."

"Hannibal, eh?" There was another pause, this time with a wondering quality. "Well, you tell Hannibal that I'll accept that apology when I finally get to approve him in person. And that he'll only get that by doing right by you. If he doesn't, he'll know about it."

Will tried to speak but couldn't get his throat to work properly. Something seemed to have got caught in it. Then his dad was cutting him off.

"I've gotta run - Marty just turned up with the part I've been waiting for all day and we've got to get this done tonight. I'll call you soon." And he rang off.

Will was left staring at his phone in stunned disbelief. It was done, it was okay. He was married to Hannibal, they were going to move in together and get a house in the country, and everything was going to be okay. If it hadn't just happened, it all would've been too good to be true.

*

should i bring anything? Bev texted in the middle of the afternoon, about that night's dinner. *wine??? that's something people do isn't it?*

don't bother bringing wine, Will replied. *honestly, there's more than enough here. um, idk, flowers maybe? a plant?*

i can't turn up and present hannibal with flowers, she said. *i just can't. don't make me.*

so a plant it is then, Will said.

Which explained why, five hours later, Bev was standing on the doorstep holding a Venus flytrap.

"Isn't it cool?" she said, gazing at it adoringly. "I got one for me as well. And I impulse-bought a book on Amazon on the way here - it's called *Savage Garden.* I'm going to get really into carnivorous plants this year - it's gonna be my new thing."

Will stared at it, thinking it was a surprisingly good gift, while she hung her bag up and fussed with her hair. She looked about herself as she did, then leaned right around Will once she caught sight of the fireplace behind him.

"This is some foyer," she said. "Wow. And look how thick that wall is!" She was off now, moving under her own steam, into the hallway. "It's like a castle in here, hiding inside a townhouse." She put her hands on her hips. "Are you *sure* your count husband isn't a vampire?"

"Wild, isn't it?" Will said, laughing at her. "And if you've finished, how about coming into the kitchen and saying hi?"

He led her to the kitchen and the spectacle of Hannibal, bedecked in crisp white cotton and brandishing a gleaming stainless steel knife, carving out neat chunks of beef from a large wet steak. Will's lips twitched. There was even a glass of deep purple wine by his side, looking exactly like venous blood.

"Beverly," Hannibal greeted, setting the knife down and wiping his hands clean. "I'm so glad you could join us."

Bev moved forward with the flytrap held out like an offering. "This is for you," she said. "Which, now I'm here, I'm realising might not to be everyone's taste. But it was either that or a peace lily, and they're kind of boring."

"Carnivorous plants certainly aren't that," agreed Hannibal, bending over the little plant. "Do you think it's hungry?" He sliced off a sliver of beef and gently brushed it against the inner surface of the trap. They both leaned closer; it snapped shut, leaving pink meat protruding from one end. "There are tiny hairs inside which trigger the trap," Hannibal said. "The more the prey struggles, the tighter it closes."

"I love how it moves - it's so cool," said Bev in an awe-stricken whisper. "I was inspired by this little guy to get one myself. They seem so macabre but they're not really, they're just feeding themselves. And I hate bugs, so it's a win-win."

Hannibal grinned at her and she grinned back. Will watched them both from the sidelines, feeling smugly happy. His best friend and his husband: what weirdos. He loved them both so much.

Eventually Hannibal straightened again. “Would you like something to drink before dinner? I have some wine open but we could easily fetch you something else.”

Bev looked startled, and shrugged. “Wine is fine?” she said uncertainly, and looked at Will for reassurance.

Hannibal also looked over at Will. “Why don’t you show Beverly the cellar and let her pick something out?” And to Bev, with a smile, he said, “There’s more than just wine down there.”

Will was trailed by Bev as they went down the stairs to the basement. “I should’ve warned you,” he said over his shoulder. “In this house wine is never just fine.”

“Holy shit, that’s a *lot* of wine,” exclaimed Bev. “Now I get why you told me not to bring any.”

It was a reaction Will had shared too, the first time he’d seen it. More than half the basement was devoted to wine, with large stainless steel coolers covering the far wall and tall wood and wire racks dividing the rest of the space up into aisles. A long glass wall enclosed the whole - to help regulate the temperature, so said Hannibal - with a glass door set into it at the bottom of the stairs. To the right, kept apart from the wines, were shelves of spirits built against a wall. Behind the wall, entered through an open arch at one side, was hidden the laundry room.

“Want to look inside?” Will said, holding open the glass door.

Bev nodded, and wandered up and down, mouth held slightly open in astonishment. Will followed. After a moment she asked, “Do you know what all these are?”

“Well yeah, mostly,” Will admitted. “It’s hard not to pick some of it up. They’re arranged by region - we’re standing in France right now. Australia and New Zealand are over there. And over here is South America and North America. It’s like a library.”

“And then?” Bev prompted.

“And then, horizontally they’re arranged by variety and vertically by either vintage or estate - that part’s a bit esoteric, I can’t always follow.”

“What about over there?” She pointed at the chiller cabinets at the end.

Will shrugged. “Champagne, things like that. And the old rare stuff - it has to be kept somewhere temperature-controlled.”

“Huh,” Bev said. “Sounds *very* expensive.” She chose a bottle at random and slid it from the rack. “Is this one good? How am I supposed to choose something to drink?”

“Don’t,” Will said simply. “Let Hannibal worry about the wine - I always do. And I think he guessed you’d rather see *those*.” He gestured at the rows of spirits, lined neatly up on the other side of the glass wall.

A light entered Bev’s eyes. She rushed out and fell gratefully on the bourbon, holding a bottle aloft in triumph. “I feel like I’ve passed the first trial in a labyrinth,” she commented, as they made their way back upstairs.

Then, accompanied by the sound of ice clinking in her tumbler, Will showed her around the house. She was fascinated by everything, happily declaring it ‘insane’, a view which the table decorations

of pale roses, pomegranates and assorted bits of bone and antler did nothing to dissuade. She loved the herb wall as well, and frankly told Hannibal so when he brought the first course in.

Will could tell he was pleased, not just about the herb wall but with how the whole evening was going. Bev and Hannibal weren't strangers to each other but there had always been a slight reserve between them, fuelled by what Will knew at heart was mutual mistrust. He didn't need them to be bosom buddies but he did want them to understand each other a little more. And so far it looked as if things were heading in the right direction.

It helped that Hannibal had scored big with the menu. For the appetiser he wheeled out a generous selection of Jewish-Korean fusion dishes of his own invention, confessing that humility had forbade him from presenting classic Korean or Jewish food for someone with Bev's background. Bev was genuinely touched and then, after she'd tasted everything, genuinely impressed. By the time they had thoroughly discussed the differences and similarities of the two food cultures, and after Bev had worked her way methodically around the selection of brisket, fish cakes, potato cakes, salads and dumplings, Hannibal was looking self-satisfied and Bev was happily doubting her ability to manage the next course. Hannibal reassured her about the entrée's proportions and then noted he would be happy to send her home with leftovers. Later, Will decided that that was the moment when the breakthrough between them had really happened.

The entrée was indeed more modest in size - a delicate little steak and kidney pie, served with some dark savoury cabbage and not much else - and dessert was a simple unflavoured ice cream made from the milk of pedigree Guernsey cows and accompanied by shards of bourbon caramel. Bev crunched and moaned her way through in wordless appreciation and, when she was finally able to speak, Hannibal asked her about her studies.

"Have you always been interested in medicine?" he asked. "I always like to know what it is which calls people to the field."

Bev thought about it for a second, then said honestly, "When I was about ten my dad took me to Body Worlds and I think that pretty much did it. I've always liked knowing how things work but to me that was just beyond fascinating, you know?"

"There's really very little difference between that and the public dissections of the 17th and 18th centuries," he said with a smile. "Especially for the anatomically curious."

"You were a surgeon, weren't you?" she said, and Hannibal nodded. "My mom was delighted when I told her I wanted to be a doctor."

"And I understand from Will you've decided to specialise in forensic pathology," Hannibal said. "That's a very dedicated path."

"I'm two years into medical school and I can already honestly say I'd be happy if all my patients were dead from now on," Bev said. "I guess I've always had an interest in the grisly. And in mysteries."

Hannibal laughed. "Much wiser to realise that now," he said. "I've met too many physicians who forgot to ask themselves how much time they'd like to spend with their fellow humans before setting out down the path of their chosen specialism. You'll need a strong stomach though."

Bev smiled. "It's not been too sorely tested yet," she said. "But I'm confident I can manage."

“There’s always one who faints at the first dissection,” Hannibal said. “If it’s not you, you’ll be fine.”

“Bev is terrifyingly well-adjusted,” Will interjected. “If she can’t do it, nobody can.”

Bev beamed at him and Hannibal picked up his glass.

“That sounds like a toast,” he said, raising it. “To the terrifyingly well-adjusted.” Will and Bev laughed and joined in.

“Do you still know some of the staff?” Bev asked, obviously having just recalled that Hannibal attended the same school she did.

Hannibal contemplated his wine for a moment. “There was Sutcliffe but he left a few years ago. Adams is still there, I believe?”

Bev was nodding and about to speak but Will suddenly remembered something he’d been meaning to ask Hannibal.

“Do you know anything about a Dr Du Maurier?” he said. “She’s the professor I’ll be helping at the department. I couldn’t find out much when I looked into her and no one’s been able to tell me anything useful, so I thought I’d ask you.”

Hannibal paused for a fraction of a second, then he set down his wineglass and turned to Will. “I wasn’t aware she was taking students,” he said. “I thought she drew the line at delivering the occasional lecture and bolstering the department’s reputation.”

“So you do know her?” Will said. “She’s asked to see me tomorrow - what’s she like? What questions should I be asking her?”

Hannibal blinked. “Yes, I know her,” he said. “She’s my psychiatrist.”

“Oh,” Will said, not quite able to cover his surprise. “Of course, I forgot you’d have a supervisor. What a weird coincidence.”

Bev had been listening with interest. “Is it normal for a psychiatrist to have a psychiatrist?” she asked.

“Supervisory sessions are strongly encouraged, if not explicitly mandatory,” Hannibal said, rising and beginning to clear the table. “Dr Du Maurier and I have a relationship which goes back some time. She’s semi-retired - I am now her only patient - but she’s an excellent therapist and mentor. She’ll be an asset to your education, Will.”

Bev was still thinking about psychiatry. “I guess it makes sense for a therapist to have a therapist - must be tough dealing with other people’s problems all day,” she said. “Maybe I should get one in case my terrifyingly well-adjusted personality starts to lean towards plain old terrifying.”

Hannibal smiled down at her. “You seem very well equipped,” he said. “But, in case it’s ever needed, I am always available for advice and am happy to hand out recommendations should you decide to look for one.”

“I suppose you could hardly do it - I wouldn’t be able to complain about Will.” Bev threw him a grin; Will pulled a face at her. “Can I help with any of this?” she asked, indicating the table, which

was already looking neat and tidy.

Hannibal denied her offer graciously. “But you can come down to the cellar and help me choose a digestif,” he said. “Another whisky, or perhaps cognac?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever tasted cognac,” she said, as she drifted out after him.

Will remained at the table after they’d gone, thinking how strange it was going to be meeting Hannibal’s psychiatrist. Anyone Hannibal would select as his supervisor must be seriously accomplished; he had high standards in everything, no matter how trivial, and this was definitely not a trivial matter. He hoped he’d be able to make a good impression.

Shortly after they’d left, Bev emerged again, cradling a bottle of beautiful amber liquid.

“I just had an impromptu tasting session,” she said, “and this stuff is *delicious*. Please can you both remember that when you’re deciding on Christmas gifts? Now, Hannibal said we’d have this in the living room - he’s just fetching glasses. Are you coming?”

As they climbed the stairs to the first floor, Will said, “If you want the full experience, if you ask really nicely Hannibal might play the harpsichord. Or-” he leaned in dramatically to Bev’s ear “-*the theremin.*”

“Oh my god,” Bev burst out. “This evening is the *best.* Do you’ll think he’ll let me have a go?”

“Absolutely,” Will said. “You just wait and see.”

*

Will was ready for his appointment with Dr Du Maurier half an hour before it began. He filled in the time in between with re-reading the notes he’d made in preparation while peeling an orange and then not eating it. There was little else he could do to ready himself - though Dr Du Maurier had published several papers already, none of them had been on this same subject. She was a practicing psychiatrist with an interest in psychopathy and other mental disorders - all her writing was concerned with treatment, not the cultural perspectives they were supposed to be discussing. But he reviewed the notes he’d made on these as well, just in case.

The corridor outside her office was deathly quiet. Will almost didn’t expect anyone to answer when he knocked but Dr Du Maurier opened it herself and smiled at him quite warmly. She was impeccably dressed, elegant enough for a cocktail party, in a knee-length black sheath dress.

Her greeting was simple and contained none of the awkwardness he was usually met with. It was almost as if she’d seen him before.

“Will? Please, come in.”

Will stepped inside and she gestured at two chairs facing each other in the centre of the room. He chose one and she lowered herself into the other, smoothing her dress down carefully. Her appearance was polished, hair sleekly waved and nails tastefully manicured, and she wore pearls at her ears. Will was soft and rumpled by contrast, with casually rolled-up sleeves and loose jeans. His nails were painted a bright coral and ragged around the cuticles.

“I hope you don’t mind sitting here,” she said, crossing her legs. “I try to keep the desk only for writing. Conversations flow better with no barriers between participants.”

Will took in her office in a single sweep: furnished at her own expense and ruthlessly tidy, lacking the teetering piles of books and papers which the other professors had. Her desk was in a corner by the window, empty save for a slender MacBook, a carafe of water and a single matching glass.

“A serious student hopes to receive the same challenge from a tutor as a patient might from a therapist,” Will said. “I take it as a compliment - you’re very highly respected.”

She smiled; it was slow and deliberately given, but quite genuine.

“You may be right to come here expecting challenge,” she said. “I’ve heard many interesting things about you. Though I wonder if you’ll still picture me as the devil’s advocate at the end of our time together.”

She smiled again and her voice was soft; every word was weighed. Will was beginning to appreciate why Hannibal would have selected her as his psychiatrist.

Her talk then turned towards the paper. She gave Will an overview of her work to date and a list of literature for him to review, but an undercurrent lingered beneath the surface. Will’s attention remained on their outward conversation while his intuition dived below, searching for the source. It returned with the suspicion that she knew who he was, and that, in turn, she was aware that he knew of their connection. A psychiatric supervisor must require context, he reasoned; Hannibal must discuss his personal life on occasion, and, after all, Will was a distinctive person on the campus. It wouldn’t be difficult to work out who he was.

He started to wonder how much of a coincidence their meeting really was, and from there to wonder how much it really mattered as long as they didn’t discuss Hannibal. And that didn’t seem likely - if anything, what lay between them felt more like a conspiracy of silence. Dr Du Maurier kept her conversation and manner tuned strictly to the professional - they discussed her research and then they discussed Will’s professional studies and aspirations. Nothing strayed into the personal; he was sure she had noticed his wedding ring, in the same way he’d noticed her pearl stud earrings, but her curiosity extended no further than that.

By the time Will was putting his notebook away he’d convinced himself no harm could come of it. And Hannibal himself had even appeared to bless their meeting by saying she’d be an asset to his education.

“Shall we make this a regular appointment?” Dr Du Maurier asked as she saw him out.

Will nodded and thanked her. “I’m looking forward to it,” he said, and meant it. He wasn’t sure if her liked her but he had a feeling getting to know her was going to be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Please do not feed your Venus flytrap human food! Hannibal is never a good role model :)
Also the *Savage Garden* book is 100% real.

~~thescavoices~~ Bev is frequently over-excited by the idea of Hannibal being a vampire - it's become a bit of a running theme :)

For anyone wondering, it takes absolutely ages to become a forensic pathologist in the US (Bachelor's, medical degree, specialist pathology training of 4-5 years, then a residency - about 13 years in total). Here, Bev is a little older than Will and has already begun her medical degree.

And finally, in the show Hannibal's steak and kidney pie is made with Bev, after her trip to the basement... :(I prefer it this was around (she still got to see the basement though!).

If you're enjoying this fic and would like to share with your followers, here is this chapter on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was spread out across the couch when Bev got home. He'd made a good start on the reading list Dr Du Maurier had given him. A new notebook dedicated to the project was already peppered with notes and an outline for a summation was taking shape too.

Bev shouted a loud hello but she didn't appear immediately. First he heard footsteps running up the stairs and the creaking of floorboards above; next came more footsteps, this time thumping back down, followed by the sound of dishes clattering in the kitchen. Will finished the paragraph he was reading just as she came in, pyjama-clad and eating a bowl of cereal.

"Starving," she explained, propping herself against the couch arm. "It's weird having you here on a Friday - I got used to being on my own. Are we ordering in pizza?"

"It's part of the custody agreement," Will said, looking up at her seriously. He gathered up his books and laptop and shoved them into his bag. "I was with Hannibal last night instead so now it's your turn."

"Ha ha - oops." She stuck her tongue out at him which resulted in her having to wipe milk off her chin.

"You're so gross," Will said, grinning. "Do you have wild parties when I'm not here or is it all cereal and pyjamas?"

"As if I can't have both at the same time, Graham," she said. "What an amateur's question, honestly."

The pizza menu was consulted shortly after, a ritual which had to be partaken in even if it was only to confirm that their order would be exactly the same as it always was. Then they whiled away the wait for their food with the usual argument about which movies to watch. Will proposed *Gaslight*, which he hadn't seen before, but Bev was strongly in favour of what she called the 'old classics', which were tended to be lurid and fun and predominantly featured vampires.

"But we've seen them so many times," Will complained, after they were settled in front of the TV.

"And that's exactly why we should watch them again," Bev said. "Because we know all the good bits and we can talk in between. We've got important subjects to cover, like, oh I don't know, last night's adventures at your husband's place?"

"Here's a crazy idea," Will said. "Why don't we talk first and watch after?"

"Nope," Bev insisted. "This is the kind of conversation which works best against a cosy background of blood-curdling screams and demonic laughter."

Will sighed and snatched up another slice of pizza. "Fine, have it your own way. But you're getting up to put it on."

“You’ll see,” Bev said, reaching for the *Ultimate Hammer House Of Horror* boxset with practiced ease. “It’ll inspire intimate confidences and all that sort of thing.”

“Oh, so it’s going to be *that* sort of conversation,” Will said. “I didn’t realise. Shouldn’t we be doing facemasks and makeovers and things like that?”

She fired up the Blu-ray player and sat down again, ignoring him. The titles for *The Devil Rides Out* rose up on the screen.

“Or how about a pillow fight?” Will asked. “You know, in matching pyjamas.”

“I’ll hit you with something,” she said, “but it won’t be a pillow. Hush, it’s starting. You know I love the beginning.”

Will fell contentedly silent. He loved their back-and-forth teasing, their nights in together, and he appreciated them even more now that they didn’t do it so often. Bev was always comparing their relationship to family, saying he was like a younger sister, and at times like this he could really believe it to be true. Now he’d seen her at Hannibal’s he was able to picture what their movie nights would be like after he’d moved in. One of the smaller rooms, perhaps a bedroom, could be turned into a den; Hannibal would inevitably insist on catering - perhaps Will would build him a pizza oven in the garden - maybe sometimes he’d join them too. Hannibal had never indicated an interest in horror movies but Will thought he’d enjoy a few of Argento’s. If not, there would be other movies to watch together - that could be a different kind of movie night.

Twenty minutes of daydreaming later, Will remembered what Bev had said about intimate confidences. He nudged her elbow. “Hey, I thought you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah,” Bev said distractedly, reaching for the pizza box. She dragged her gaze from the screen to glance at Will, blinked once, and remembered too. “Oh yeah, right! Last night!” She turned away from the TV, rearranging the pillows behind her to get comfortable. “There’s so much to discuss,” she said, spreading her hands wide enough to encompass an entire world. “Where to start?”

“I got the impression you had a list ready to go,” Will said. He pressed his lips together, momentarily uncomfortable. There was something he wanted to get straightened out. “Could we get serious for a minute? Could you start by telling me how you feel about Hannibal now?”

He watched her face change, falling out of its habitual lopsided grin and into something more pensive.

“I know you don’t entirely approve and I really do appreciate all the effort you’ve gone to in trying to be supportive,” said Will. “My impression from last night was that you actually had a good time and I thought… maybe your opinion might’ve shifted a little?”

She was still watching him quietly, but now she just looked guilty.

“I won’t be mad if that’s not the case,” Will said. “Just give me an honest response. I’ve been sitting here daydreaming about watching movies with you at Hannibal’s, after I move out. I’d just like to know where we stand so I know what to expect.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot too - what it’s going to be like when you move in with him, how much will I see you… things like that. It’s hard to disentangle my feelings.” She pulled her knees up and hugged them into her chest. “It’s complicated, you know? It’s not that

I don't like him, it's more that everything's changed so quickly. This older rich guy turns up and all of a sudden your life is completely transformed. It could be a good thing for you - a *very* good thing, I get that - but it's all so unbalanced. And then you went and got married without any warning. The whole situation is an unusual one - you have to admit that much."

Will nodded. He could take that on the chin. "I do know it's unusual," he said. "But Hannibal has changed things a lot less than he could have. The changes happening are ones I'm in control of."

"I'm just want to look out for you," she said. "I'm pretty sure I'm being over-cautious. I mean, I can really see it. You two really do love each other, it's obvious you're happy together. I can't fault Hannibal in the way he treats you." She tipped her head back and gazed at the shadows on the ceiling, thinking. "And he's weird, funny-weird - in a good way, you know? He suits you. I had fun at dinner - I laughed a lot, more than I expected maybe." She sighed again, found Will's hand and squeezed it. "Don't worry about me," she said. "Everything will work out. I just need a little more time to adjust."

Will squeezed her hand back. "So you'll come to movie night when I'm living with Hannibal?"

"Of course," she said. "We'll take turns hosting. And, oh my god - will Hannibal make us food?"

Will told her about the pizza oven daydream and her expression assumed a blissful aspect.

"But I don't want to force him into being our personal pizza chef," he warned. "He might not enjoy it. We could always make it ourselves."

"*Apple pie,*" Bev said in a stage whisper.

"You know we don't speak of that," Will said. "And you also know that only went so badly because I forgot to set a timer."

"I bet he *would* make us pizzas though," Bev said. "At least the first time anyway. I spent all day thinking about the ice cream we had last night - how did he make something which is already delicious *even more delicious?* It's freaky, he's too good at it."

Will gave her a huge shit-eating grin. "It's not just cooking he's good at."

"Yeah, yeah, you've told me that before," she said, waving a hand dismissively. But now she was warming to her theme. "And he's got all those crazy drawings and all that music and stuff. Is it possible to be *too* talented? There has to be something to balance it all out - a portrait in the attic maybe?"

"That's really bad at playing the harpsichord?" Will said. "I think any kind of painting might struggle with that."

"God, I wish I hadn't chickened out of asking him to play," she said. "I just got this terror I'd start laughing - not because it would be funny, but because it seemed exactly the kind of thing you shouldn't do when someone plays the harpsichord."

"It's really not a big deal, you can hear it next time," Will said. "If you get the giggles I'll screen you. He plays all the time - most evenings, actually, after dinner. I listen to him play and study at the same time."

“Oh my god, I can just picture it: you, flung artistically across the couch, and Hannibal, dramatically lit by candles, playing out his love for you,” Bev said. “Very gothic. How can you study with all that going on?”

Will laughed. “I don’t study by candlelight for one thing,” he said. “I find the music helpful - it sort of weaves into my memory and I can use it later to retrieve the information when I need it.”

“You’re so weird,” Bev said wonderingly.

Will nodded sagely. “It’s been said.”

“Didn’t you meet his psychiatrist today? What’s she like?”

Will quickly decided not to mention his suspicions about Dr Du Maurier knowing who he was. “Fine,” he said, shrugging. “Kind of chilly but achingly professional in every way. And obviously brilliant - it’s going to be good experience for me.”

He paused then; there was something he wanted her opinion on.

“Professor Crawford mentioned that FBI internship again this morning,” he said. “I’m going to need to tell him something concrete about it soon but I don’t know what to do. What do you think - is it a good idea?”

She drew in a decisive breath. “I think it’s such a good idea I’m going to apply for it myself,” she said. “Why wouldn’t it be? It can’t possibly hurt your future, no matter what you decide to do. And, imagine: we could even end up catching cool serial killers together for real.”

“You should probably avoid calling serial killers cool in your interview, you know. I don’t know much but I do know that.”

“Of course I wouldn’t call them cool,” she scoffed. “Mainly because it wouldn’t be true - most serial killers are actually very boring. Only the cool ones are cool.”

Will gave this the smile it deserved. “I know it can’t hurt,” he said, “but I also know it won’t end there if I apply and I get in - hell, even if I don’t get in. Crawford is all over me about this. I need to give him a clear answer or he’ll keep pushing me.”

“Hmmm yeah,” Bev said. “I see your problem. You’re managing pushy parent syndrome with the added complication of him not actually being your parent.”

“I’m just not sure if it’d be good for me,” Will said. “Dealing with all that stuff everyday - not just reading about it but really *seeing* it. How can anyone be expected to cope with it for any length of time?” He paused. “*And yet…* ”

“And yet it’s super interesting and you’re drawn to it,” she finished for him. “I know, I get it. But I don’t think anyone knows in advance they’ve got what it takes - though they test you, right? No one’s going to shove you out there unprepared.”

Will was silent for a moment, mulling that over. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Look, I can’t tell you what’s the right thing to do,” said Bev. “Just that I think I could do it. And that I want to protect and serve and all that good stuff. Justice! Putting assholes behind bars with science!”

Will laughed. “You could have that embroidered on the back of your shirt,” he said. “But I think it’s ‘fidelity, bravery, integrity’ you’re thinking of.”

“Whatever,” she said. “You know what I mean. And - okay, don’t take this the wrong way, but would you feel differently about all this if there was no Hannibal?”

“You mean am I worrying about how this would affect him? He seems okay about it either way - if anything, he thinks I’m overthinking the whole thing.”

“Well, he’s definitely right about that,” Bev said. “But I meant that, because of him, you can have an exciting and fulfilling life without taking any risks. Hannibal would do anything for you. You could throw in the towel and decide to become an artist or a poet instead. You could start up a little garage and spend all day fixing things. You could get a boat and sail it around the world. The boundaries of what you can do have shifted - you can want things now that you couldn’t afford to let yourself want before.”

“I see what you’re saying - that without Hannibal I might have have taken a leap into the unknown already and not be holding back. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to do this before I met Hannibal either.”

“All I know is this,” Bev said. “Everything you’ve done and everything you’ve been interested in has been leading you down this path. You like figuring out how people think, you like solving puzzles, you like righting wrongs. You like - what’s it called?”

“Abnormal psychology,” Will supplied. “Psychopathology.”

“Yes, that,” she said. “See? It makes sense - imagine what a good profiler you’d be, with your brain and your crazy intuition and your work ethic. But something seems to be stopping you from making that grab for it.” She paused and shrugged. “Maybe it’s right to stop you, who knows? Better find out what it is so you can decide whether or not it should - and then you’ll have your answer.”

Will nodded, thinking hard. Underneath all the wisecracks and teasing, Bev had a clear head and was full of good advice. And he knew she was right. He didn’t know if it was fear of the unknown or something else, but there lurked in his heart a whisper he couldn’t hear, an image he couldn’t see. It was like trying to remember a forgotten dream which had warned him of something.

The TV blared suddenly and made them both jump. It was the credits; the music which accompanied them seemed about twenty times louder than the actual movie.

“Huh, it’s over,” Bev said, clicking off the screen. “We missed it. Oh well - there’s always the next time.”

*

The next couple of weeks passed without much incident. Now that he had something to challenge him, Will settled more happily into his work at the psychology department. Dr Du Maurier had increased their meetings to twice a week and, though Will couldn’t see that she particularly needed his help, he was happy to agree to it. Hannibal had convinced him that having a mentor was not only desirable but necessary and, for the time being, Dr Du Maurier looked to be willing to step into that role. Their appointments got longer. She set aside more time for their discussions, which grew from forty-five minutes to an hour, then to an hour and a half and more. She suggested

reading, books and articles unconnected with her paper; they talked about his future studies. Will almost raised the FBI internship with her before dismissing it as too trivial, a waste of their time. He knew how to solve that problem himself, even if he hadn't managed it yet.

Hannibal, too, was happy. Will was spending extra nights with him and they'd opened negotiations into how to better blend their lives together. One cosy night on the couch Will had told him about movie night, along with the den and the pizza oven, and Hannibal had pulled him into his lap to do something they really should've gone to bed for, which led Will to believe his answer to be an enthusiastically positive one. He enquired only once about Will's work with Dr Du Maurier, asking if the experience was proving useful. Will had reassured him it was and Hannibal had seemed satisfied and asked nothing more.

It also appeared that his mom had forgiven him. She started to ask after Hannibal during their phonecalls - at first perhaps only out of what was, for her, an unusual feeling of duty - but when she realised that Will often called her from Hannibal's she'd asked if he was free to talk. Suffused with vague dread, Will had passed his phone to Hannibal and then watched in horror as he'd wandered away with it. Will had resolutely snatched up the nearest book and tried to absorb himself in it but to no avail. The dread remained until Hannibal calmly returned his phone, with his mother still on the line. Later, Will had tried to find out what they'd said to each other, and in answer Hannibal had reeled off a list of subjects which included the songs of Henry VIII, RD Laing, and Will's enduring fondness for Laffy Taffy. Will was a little stunned but at least it proved they were getting along.

In contrast, his dad hadn't called back but Will had instead received two texts about a fishing trip he'd been on. Nothing explicit was said - their content focused on the conditions (calm with a mild breeze) and the fishing (a decent haul of walleye, one of which was over nine pounds) - but Will knew what they meant. Nothing had changed, his dad sent his love. The situation with Hannibal had been accepted and the relief Will felt began to settle more permanently over his spirit.

The Friday after he'd received his dad's messages, Will was summoned to Professor Crawford's office for a reason left unspecified. Melinda's phone trilled with the sound which meant it was an internal call. She answered and said 'yes, of course' and 'yes, I will' into the receiver and then put it down to inform Will that Professor Crawford wanted 'a word in his office'.

Neither of them were troubled by this. Professor Crawford's interactions with Will were, as they were with everybody, intermittent and abrupt. Will set off for his office pretty sure he only wanted to check how things were going with Dr Du Maurier and to drop more hints about the internship.

But when he was called inside Will encountered something very unexpected. Someone unexpected, in fact, who twisted round in her seat as he entered and who coloured just a little when she met his eyes.

There was an uncomfortable pause, which Professor Crawford evidently noticed. The introductions he'd been about to make stalled in mid-air.

"Hello, Will," Alana said. She sounded apologetic.

"Do you two know each other?" Professor Crawford asked. He was planted solidly at his desk, surprise splashed across his face.

Will felt his stomach sink. There were certain facts he'd kept veiled from Professor Crawford, particularly as it had been Professor Crawford who'd first introduced him to Hannibal. It was less awkward for everyone if he didn't know the consequences of their meeting - Will had figured he

could learn about it later if needed, as if it had happened spontaneously and without his involvement. He just hoped that Alana would pick up on his discomfort and say something noncommittal.

But Alana appeared to think his discomfort was all because of her. She glanced uncertainly at Will before she spoke to Professor Crawford. “I bumped into Hannibal Lecter about a month ago,” she said, “and he invited me to have dinner at his house.”

Professor Crawford’s brow worked alarmingly. “And you found Will there?” He stared straight at Will.

Will, knowing he’d gone bright red, tried to meet his eyes in a level and unassuming fashion.

“Oh,” Professor Crawford said, after a very brief moment during which the penny dropped. “Well. In that case there’s no need to introduce you. Have a seat, Will.”

Burning with mortification, Will took the empty seat next to Alana. He heard her swear under her breath, having just realised how badly she’d erred. They sat stolidly side-by-side, equally uncomfortable but comrades in the joint pretence of there being nothing whatsoever wrong.

“This may be redundant now,” Professor Crawford said to Will, “but it occurred to me that Dr Bloom here might be able to offer you a little insight into the workings of the FBI. She’s consulted on a few cases, she’s an excellent and knowledgeable practitioner. She’d be able to answer any questions you might have. I was going to suggest you go out for coffee - but perhaps this is a conversation you two have already had?”

“Coffee’s a great idea,” Alana said, before Will could answer. “Will and I haven’t really discussed our professional interests and as I’m here and I’m free, I’d be happy to.”

She turned and flashed a meaningful smile at Will. Will blinked and understood: he was being rescued. He added his agreement to hers and was pleased to see Professor Crawford looking satisfied that his efforts hadn’t been wasted. The issue of Hannibal seemed to have been forgotten.

As soon as they were outside the office, Alana spun to face Will. “Oh god, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I thought he knew. I seem to be constantly taking my foot out of my mouth around you. Look, forget coffee, let me buy you lunch to apologise? Even if you’re not as keen on the FBI as Jack thinks you should be. We can just eat, no big deal.”

Surprisingly, Will’s first instinct was to laugh. “Well, you did kind of rescue me in there.” He paused, and rubbed the back of his neck while he thought. He hadn’t anticipated the prospect of seeing Alana again, but now it had happened the idea of lunch wasn’t so terrible. Maybe he could lay a few things to rest. “Um, lunch would be nice, thank you.”

She smiled back. “He means well,” she said. “But I know Jack can be a bit overbearing. You seem to be quite the favourite.”

Will drew in a breath. “Looks that way, doesn’t it.”

They’d reached Melinda, who was still at her desk. Will explained he’d been ordered out for coffee with Dr Bloom and they both walked out into the sunshine.

“We don’t have to go anywhere nice,” Will said, before realising how ungrateful he sounded. “What I mean is - it’s okay, you don’t need to take me out to apologise. It was mistake. And Professor Crawford was going to find out about me and Hannibal one day - I just never really worked out how to tell him.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “He sort of introduced us, you see.”

Alana stopped mid-stride and stared at him. “Oh dear,” she said. A nervous giggle escaped her; she held the rest in with her hand. “I’m sorry, it’s not funny-”

“Yeah, it is,” Will said, starting to laugh now. “It’s actually very funny when you think about it.”

“His face,” Alana said. “Poor Jack.”

Will smiled at her and it felt easy and unforced. He liked her, he realised. Especially like this, sharing a joke in the street. It was miles away from their strained beginnings. Maybe this could be them starting again.

He led her to a good coffeeshop favoured by some of the older, more discerning college students. It was still a little early for lunch and there was a table free.

“I had no idea it was you I was coming to talk to,” Alana said, after they’d ordered and sat down. “Jack just called in a favour - said he had a student who could use some advice and would I spare twenty minutes for coffee with them. If I’d known I wouldn't have ambushed you like that.”

“I think we ambushed each other,” Will said. “It was quite the surprise.” He took a breath to prepare himself. “Look, about that night at dinner. I’m happy to just forget about it but for my part I’m sorry. I was caught off-guard and I didn’t react very well. Being social is not one of my strengths.”

She smiled warmly at him. “You’re doing fine right now,” she said. “Hannibal told me about your empathy condition.”

“Like you said - he likes the rarefied,” Will said. Alana’s face fell at his tone. “Sorry,” he said again. “I get a little sharp when I’m feeling defensive.”

Alana looked down at her hands. “It’s my fault you feel defensive,” she said. “Because of the things you heard me say.”

“If we’re being honest I was feeling defensive before that,” Will said. He gestured helplessly at Alana, at her air of effortless, unchanging femininity. “It’s hard being me, sometimes - always flying in the face of expectations. I didn’t know you were coming for dinner and I found you standing in the kitchen, looking like you belonged there.”

“But I don’t belong there,” Alana said. “And I’m sorry too. The things I said were- Well, I’m sorry. Let’s leave it at that.”

Their food order arrived and for several moments they were occupied with making enough space on the table. They shared a grin, one tinged with greediness.

“I think we over-ordered,” Alana said. “But who can resist a side of fries? Or pickles?”

They concentrated on eating and silence fell. Will was hungry; he’d woken late and had had to miss breakfast.

“Did you want to talk about the FBI?” Alana asked, when half of her sandwich had gone. “I don’t want to take discussing it off the table if it’s something you’re actually interested in.”

Will took another bite and chewed it slowly. “I talked it over with a friend recently and we decided there’s something holding me back from going for it,” he said, after he’d swallowed. “I haven’t worked out what it is though.”

“Has the FBI been on your radar for a while now, or just since Jack brought it up?”

Will set his sandwich down. “Honestly? For a while.” He watched Alana choose a fry from the bowl, neat as a bird with a worm. “Abnormal psychology interests me a lot, so does criminal psychology. It’s hard to avoid the BAU.”

“There’s plenty of other places to work,” Alana said. “Plenty of other paths you could take. It all depends on where your interests lie. Have you talked about it with Hannibal?”

“He hasn’t expressed much of an opinion, except to suggest I’m overthinking it,” Will said. “I know he has one but he wants me to make my own choices.”

Alana nodded a couple of times and dabbed her mouth carefully with a napkin. “I’ve always had the impression Hannibal swims easily through life - it’s not so much that he has a path, more like he has no problems finding one when there’s a risk of getting lost. It’s not always that simple for others.”

“Hannibal is definitely resilient,” Will agreed, smiling. “I know I’ve got his backing whatever I decide. It’s not him holding me back.”

“You must’ve had a lot of change in your life recently,” Alana said. “Maybe it’s simply that it’s too much to consider right now. Nothing more complicated than that.”

A bark of laughter escaped Will. “A cornucopia of change,” he said. “An embarrassment of riches - where to live, how to live, what to do with my life. I’m supposed to figure all this out *then* find someone to love, not the other way around.”

“I should sagely agree and tell you you’re at an important age; a sort of crossroads,” Alana said. “But the truth is these things are never that settled. Questions like that plague us all our lives. Ninety-five per cent of my patients would agree.”

Will gave her a wry look. “Sounds hopeless,” he said. “Maybe Hannibal’s way is better - all I have to do is just stop worrying so much.”

This time Alana didn’t laugh along with him. She didn’t quite meet his eyes either.

She shifted a little in her chair. “About Hannibal-” she said, then stopped.

Will frowned; she tried again.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” she said. “I’ve thought about it a lot but I didn’t know if I’d have the chance. I didn’t know if it was the right thing to do, if you’d listen to me.” Alana paused and drew a breath; she was becoming agitated and with it grew Will’s alarm. “You’re not going to thank me for this,” she said, “which is a pity, because I like you, Will. I want you to know that; I believe in you. But I have to ask you this.”

A strange and silent horror took hold of Will. He was afraid suddenly, terribly afraid. He didn't want to hear her speak but he was stuck, held fast. He couldn't stand and neither could he raise his arms to shield himself from whatever was coming his way.

"Have you ever noticed anything about him?" Alana asked. Her expression was strained - she was holding something bigger inside. "Anything odd?"

A rush of something released Will's body: relief. His arms could move again, easy and light; his blood and breath unfroze. "Odd?" he asked, incredulous. "What does that mean? Did you really bring me here to ask me that?"

She ignored him, her voice calm but speaking with new urgency. "I'm asking because I noticed something once," she said. "It was a tiny thing, almost nothing."

Will found himself stunned - she was really serious. Cold prickled his palms. The urge to run had vanished; now he was drawn in, leaning closer. "What kind of thing?" He wanted to know, *had* to know what she'd seen in Hannibal.

"Like a slip," she said. "A glimpse of something hidden, I don't know." She struggled with herself for a moment, then continued. "It was when we were working at the hospital. We were checking the admissions list - when he read down it something slid from his face and what I saw there frightened me. I don't know how else to describe it. It was… like an instinct in me woke up and urged me to run."

Will, frowning deeply, strained to understand what she meant. It sounded like nothing, just a trick of the imagination, easily brushed aside. But she was so intent in her purpose.

"I convinced myself that I imagined it," she said. "It was easy to dismiss once my shift had ended - I'd been working too hard, I was tired, lacking sleep. All the usual complaints of a junior doctor. But a few weeks later I saw a name in a newspaper: Petras Kolnas. It was an unusual name - I remember reading it and thinking of that afternoon, feeling the same feelings as I'd had then." She was utterly still now, her eye emotionless as it met his. "Kolnas had been on the admissions list that day. The newspaper said he'd been murdered and his body had been found mutilated."

Will almost laughed. He blinked, trying to shrug off his mounting dread. "What the hell are you saying? You can't seriously think there was a connection with Hannibal?"

Alana sighed. She passed her hand over her brow, a gesture of defeat. "I don't know," she said. "All I know is in my mind those two things are linked. I never told anyone - there was nothing and no one to tell. Kolnas was a criminal, involved in drugs, trafficking, all kinds of things. The police thought he'd got his comeuppance at the hands of a rival and closed the case."

Will sprang to his feet. "I don't understand why you're telling me this," he said, keeping his voice low so the other diners wouldn't overhear. Before him lay his lunch, half uneaten. "This is crazy." He found his bag, grabbed his phone from off the table.

"I'm telling you because I closed my eyes and walked on," Alana said. Her insistence made him pause - he couldn't help it. He felt compelled to hear everything, the whole preposterous tale. "The more I looked at Hannibal, the more things I noticed which didn't feel quite right. So I put a polite distance between us," she said. "And I just walked on. When I ran into him and he invited me for dinner, I wasn't going to accept. But he told me he'd met someone, said he'd like me to meet them,

and I realised I wanted to meet them too. Because I thought, that way, I'll know if this is crazy or not. Because maybe they've seen something too."

Will stilled. A sense of unreality had fallen across everything. The casual disarray of the café around them was abstract and meaningless; the forks and plates and cups scattering the tables had more coherence than the wooden mannequins using them. The pattern the chairs made across the floor was a form of writing he couldn't read. Nothing made sense, it was all skewed.

He looked at his arm. Alana had taken hold of it, gently.

"I don't think it was nothing," she said. "And if you know what I'm talking about, if it sparks any recognition in you at all - act. It's too late to tell you not to get too close, but do what you can. Save yourself."

Will's silence stretched out a long way. Too long, he realised, for any denials. If he'd left before it would've been okay; he could have closed his eyes and walked on too. But he'd remembered the butcher at the farmer's market and, later, the chill gleam of Hannibal's voice as he'd uttered the word *underbred*. His understanding as they'd left the stall had been silent, complete. Vicious. He remembered himself saying, months ago, *you're anything but tame. But you're mine.*

He pulled his arm free of Alana's grasp and set his bag on his shoulder. An immense distance stretched between them.

Empathy doesn't tell me what it is you've done, he'd told Hannibal. *And I don't know if I want the details.*

His legs were numb. He hadn't wanted the details. He hadn't asked because he hadn't wanted to know.

"I have an appointment," he said to Alana's white, resigned face. *With Hannibal's analyst,* his mind quietly reminded him. "Thank you for lunch."

"Just think about what I said," Alana called as he walked off. "Just think about it. *Please* Will. Just *think*."

Chapter End Notes

Ruh-roh!! If you need something to lighten the mood, here's what happened with the apple pie.

Also Bev's opinions on serial killers are basically my gf's and I shamelessly stole them.

If you're enjoying this fic and would like to share with your followers, here is this chapter on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Oh no, it begins!!

Teeny tiny warning for a description of gaslighting/heavy duty manipulation - nothing you shouldn't be able to handle if you've seen the show but ya know. Be careful and all that (and drop me a comment if you need more info).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Without stopping Will went straight back to campus with steady, even strides. The unreality which had cloaked the café stretched out after him, membranous; threads of it clung, surging around his legs like a pack of feral dogs. He kept walking. He closed his eyes.

He left it behind. All of it.

His problem, when he reached Dr Du Maurier's office, was clear. His pulse was raging, his breath ragged: she would notice. She would feel obliged to ask if he was okay, unless he could calm himself down. He glanced at the closed door. He was five minutes early, enough time to plead illness and go home. But he didn't want to go home - he wanted something quite different.

His imagination penetrated, pushing through to the other side of the door, where it was calm and elegantly aloof. Obliquely he was reminded of Hannibal and felt soothed, and then felt shocked at feeling soothed. Alana had wanted to warn him; she had sought to shatter his safe place, to reveal a wolf in sheep's clothing crouched within. She'd meant well but she hadn't succeeded. He wasn't afraid and he didn't need saving.

That was something to hold onto. Will felt it settle over him like a blanket, muffling everything else. *He wasn't afraid and he didn't need saving.*

What he did need was clarity. So he knocked on Dr Du Maurier's door and waited quietly for her to open it.

*

Inside, seated opposite Dr Du Maurier, Will found he was quite composed. Everything was as it should be: his notebook was open on his knee, ready to catch and contain any points of note or instruction; the water glass and carafe were on the desk, glinting in a stray beam of sunlight. They had conversed easily, with little or no attempt at small talk. Dr Du Maurier hadn't asked about his morning or his week, and she wouldn't. Will felt secure - if he chose, he could walk out of there as though Alana had said nothing at all.

Dr Du Maurier crossed her legs. "Have you considered Hare's assessment of Sissy Spacek's character in *Badlands*?" she said.

Will answered her easily but his mind was elsewhere. The same thread which linked him to Alana also joined him to Dr Du Mariuer. Like Alana, had she sought him out deliberately? She must have seen more of Hannibal than Alana had, perhaps even more than Will. She'd had more time to look and her style of looking was different, clear-eyed and dispassionate. If she had been frightened, she wouldn't have shown it. After all, wolves could smell fear.

What kind of person becomes Hannibal's analyst? he wondered. *What kind of person falls in love with him? What kind of person am I?*

Their conversation travelled onwards, as it always did, making its sinuous way out of the realms of cultural perspectives on psychopathy and into wider topics. Suddenly Will understood her purpose. Dr Du Maurier had no message for him, no words of warning to deliver; instead she was creating space for him to speak. Their meetings were, quite simply, an opportunity for mutual elucidation.

"You know, Dr Du Maurier, I had a strange experience just before this appointment," Will began, once a suitable pause had opened. "I came here with half a mind to share it with you."

Her gaze was coolly curious. Will met her eyes without a shred of self-consciousness.

"But on reflection I'm not sure that I can." He paused, as if hesitating. "It may be unethical for you to discuss it with me."

A subtle shift came over her demeanor. Outwardly she remained relaxed, but Will had a strong impression of pricked curiosity, of the relief and exhilaration of a quarry finally sighted.

"I see the dilemma," she said, understanding at once. "It would certainly be stepping into an ethical grey area. Are ethics important to you, Will?"

Will blinked. He should have expected that - he'd known she would challenge him from the moment they first met. "I believe so, yes."

"And loyalty too, I imagine?"

Will frowned a little, knowing he was being pushed. But he stepped into the flow and let it take him. "Is there something wrong with loyalty?" he asked, under the guise of innocence.

She smiled indulgently. "I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. I am interested instead in what happens when our ethics and loyalties find themselves in conflict."

Will crossed his legs, mirroring her pose. He smiled back. "Hard and fast rules can be a blunt instrument," he said. "I'd judge it on a case-by-case basis."

"So would I," she said. "And in this case I choose to step into a grey area. What was this strange experience which you considered sharing with me?"

"You might say I was ambushed," Will said. "I was given a warning, of sorts. Someone wanted to let me know there was a wolf in my midst." He paused. "In *our* midst."

"You don't sound convinced," Dr Du Maurier observed. "Maybe you don't really believe in the existence of this wolf."

She was right, Will recognised. He was suspended between belief and disbelief, only sure that Alana's fears lacked insight. She had looked away before she could gain any.

He let his gaze travel over the window, clouded with gauzy drapes. “I prefer understanding to conviction,” he said, glancing back at Dr Du Maurier. “My ambusher had plenty of the latter but not much of the former. They were frightened off before they could acquire some.” Will paused, re-crossing his legs. He brushed a speck of lint from his knee - even as he did it, the gesture reminded him of Hannibal. “I don’t believe you or I would act the same way.”

A beat passed. They considered each other in silence.

Dr Du Maurier took a patient breath. “Where do you think my loyalty lies?” she asked.

It wasn’t a rhetorical question. Will tilted his head and tried to read her. “To yourself,” he said, after a few moments. “You strike me as a person who always acts with extreme care and attention. You seem unlikely to place something as precious as loyalty in the hands of others.”

A faint smile frosted over her lips. “Self-preservation has been instrumental to my survival,” she said. “You might say it’s been my greatest achievement.”

Will frowned. “Has it been a matter of survival?” he asked carefully. The thought had not occurred to him; everything was still too new, too unreal.

“Can you think of no malign influences which might swallow you whole if you let them?” The tone of her voice was almost syrupy: she was teasing him. Dr Du Maurier glanced at his hand, laid across his thigh. “The snake you wear declares your loyalty,” she said, then stopped, appraising him afresh. “You are a beautiful young creature, like a bold little deer. He loves things which are beautiful.”

Will choked down his annoyance, turning it into derision instead. “I’m not going to be devoured,” he said.

Dr Du Maurier ignored him. “Things which are both beautiful and interesting are rare,” she went on. “Rarer still is someone who is capable of understanding him. Do you believe you’ve understood him?”

Will didn’t answer, feeling himself mocked.

“You’ve seen just enough and you think you’ve confronted it, but you haven’t,” she said. “You're distorting the truth to keep who you think you are consistent.”

“My truth isn't distorted, Dr Du Maurier.” Will said. “I know what's true.”

She watched him for a few moments. Her silence was hard and unforgiving; Will felt something crack under its pressure.

“I am not here to advocate for the devil, Will,” she said. “My purpose is merely to help you advocate for yourself.”

Will frowned in confusion, feeling the threads of their conversation slipping away. The facade he’d worn so easily crumbled and fell. Beneath it he was young and frightened.

“What am I supposed to do?” he asked. She was his last link; the last barrier before he had to face the source of his fear. He could feel her drawing away from him as she spoke.

“I see you’ve found your conviction,” she said with satisfaction. “I will tell you something: I prefer understanding too. But self-preservation decrees it’s time to take a step back. There’s a change approaching and I’d rather not be too close when it arrives.”

She stood, signalling the end of their talk. “I plan to disappear. Should anyone come looking, they won’t find me.”

Will got to his feet too. He felt flayed but strangely grateful.

“Thank you for your assistance, Will,” she said, extending her hand. “It’s been most valuable. I will of course send a glowing report of you to Professor Crawford before I leave.”

Will shook her hand - it was the first time he’d touched her. Her hand was warm, alive; a beautifully articulated thing of flesh and blood.

They parted like that. Will knew he’d never see her again, as if having attained a brief unity it was imperative that they must separate forever.

She said only one more thing, just as he reached for the door handle.

“Fear is an instinct with a long evolutionary history,” she said. “Don’t be so dismissive of those who heed its call. It’s a useful tool in the business of survival and those of us who prefer understanding need it more than most. Be careful, Will.”

Will looked over his shoulder at her, hand still on the door handle. Then he opened it and walked out.

*

His first action was to find Melinda and tell her he wasn’t feeling well. She excused him without hesitation. “You look pale,” she said, looking worriedly into his face. “Very pale indeed. Go home and rest.” Will turned from her without another word.

Once outside the building his legs threatened to fail him. He stumbled off the path, where there were too many people striding past, and leaned against the trunk of an old elm. He felt buffeted by their easy purpose, cast adrift and without moorings. The floor beneath him beckoned, so he sat, on the thinning and scuffed grass. From a distance he’d look like just another student, taking a break in between classes.

Go home, Melinda had said.

There came a pang in his chest, a tight contraction of grief. Hannibal had been home - what was he now? Will longed for him still; he couldn’t conceal that from himself. A part of his mind refused to listen to all he’d heard. It wanted to go to him and be soothed by denials and dismissals, even if they were lies.

He lay back and looked up at the sky and the shifting canopy of leaves. They made a sound like the ocean, restless, ever-changing. *Listen to the ocean,* he told himself. *Listen.*

He would not be able to rest if he chose to go home to Bev. There would be no possibility of rest until he understood what there was to fear.

His breath was coming more easily now, keeping time with the swell of the ocean, and his mind was full of strange breezes. There was light and air and freedom. There was his river, his little stream, and Hannibal waiting for him on its bank.

A decision formed, raising itself up from the waters of his mind. He would choose understanding, embrace his fear. He would catch his breath under the shelter of the tree and then he would take a bus to Hannibal's house, where he would wait for him to return for the evening.

And perhaps, on the way, he would look up Petras Kolnas and find out what it was that Hannibal had actually done.

*

The kitchen cabinets and surfaces were softly lit, as expectant as an empty stage. Hannibal sat outside the light, in the shadows of the dress circle, thinking of loss and of lost time. He'd waited so long. There was no hope now of reversing it.

Between his fingers was pinched the stem of a wine glass. He raised it to his nose; violets and pipe tobacco, then sandalwood and plums. The aromas chased away memories of other, less pleasant, scents - the turmoil in his mind was unusual and from it unhappy, fetid things threatened to escape. The wine was a pleasant distraction - a very good Amarone, complex enough to parry for his attention. A sip revealed dried cherries and prunes, bitter dark chocolate, accompanied by a mineral touch of stone and the distinctiveness of vanilla.

It raised thoughts of old Byzantine, of excess and restraint held in fatal but exquisite balance. It reminded him of Will: a velvety texture but surprisingly acidic.

There was a note on the chair arm by his elbow; a note already read, tucked into its sliced-open envelope. He should burn it before Will arrived but could not quite bring himself to. The contents had already been committed to memory so the loss of the paper the message was carried on should not matter, but Hannibal found himself in a state he'd rarely encountered: disbelief. The event relayed to him that afternoon had been hard to grasp and it remained so. For the first time in his life he could not trust in his power of memory therefore the note and its contents must remain material a little while longer.

Nearly everything which had happened in his life, no matter how brutal, he'd met with equanimity. Where that hadn't been possible, when rage had surged and spewed from him instead, he'd always been fully cognisant, secure in his pure and comprehending acceptance of the facts. All his actions had been conscious and deliberate. This cognisance required acceptance; what then if acceptance failed to come? In all of his plans he'd never considered this news as a possibility. It was unthinkable, far beyond disappointment and gone into the realm of catastrophe. It rocked something close to his core, threatened to fling wide the trapdoors and let out that which could not give ease.

He'd waited so long. He'd held himself back, all the promise and the fulfillment of promise, put on hold until this had been completed. His life's work had stalled and would remain unfinished. The note was a pill too bitter to swallow.

His heart flickered with a creeping, crystallising pain. Ice gathered, heavy and suffocating, like it had during that long ago winter. He tasted the wine again: sweet tobacco, dried figs and molasses, and again he was reminded of Will. The time was barely four - there were two more hours until he returned. Two hours for Hannibal to do what was necessary.

Plenty of time. Upstairs; he would take the note upstairs and burn it there, a final offering. Afterwards he would decide what to do about Will.

He sipped his wine in the dark: Will. He had hoped to bring this to him, eventually. He would have understood; he was capable of understanding. It might have taken time but he could've been persuaded. Will had shared with him his family, an act both touching and naive. Hannibal treasured it, kept it close. It was only right that he should return the favour - the story now belonged to him as well.

The tide of ice had turned; his heart now beat warm and strong, free of its binding frost. Will: a problem he'd not yet managed to solve. Often Hannibal had studied his sleeping form; hair tossed across the pillow or part-obscuring his face, a bare shoulder poking free of the sheets. Will slept like he lived; restlessly, with his limbs scattered freely across the bed; but his sleep was always deep, his mind working hard, his concentration total. Hannibal watched him breathlessly, wishing he could climb inside his dreams. What would it be like to follow him there, into the maelstrom of his inner being, that window into his deepest, most unregulated self? They must be bright, singing things, underscored by great dark depths - Will would dream in full colour, with all the range and scale of human emotion. The vision of a sleeping Will was so complete that even the hot scent of him rising from the pillow caught in his nostrils.

Hannibal breathed him in; leaned a little closer. He was aroused, a heaviness had settled in his groin, but he tilted his mind away and thought instead of his early fantasies of solving the unsolvable. They gave him a curious pain, a feeling like regret. If it looked unlikely that Will would understand, or if perhaps he refused to, there were other methods which Hannibal knew could succeed where others had failed. His medical bag was well-stocked - overstocked, perhaps, as some less-creative physicians might say. It would be a simple matter to administer a sedative and remove Will somewhere quiet; to keep him in a reasonable and sympathetic frame of mind until his clemency had been attained.

As a solution this remained a last resort only - Hannibal had never been satisfied with it. Parts of it troubled him unduly - the idea of Will, drugged and unresponsive, was particularly abhorrent. It was unnatural: Will was quick and lively, bright above all things. The idea that Will would not know him was frightening. It brought to mind his mother, when she lay on the grass, her dress on fire and her skin blackening.

Also, it would be difficult to manage. Will would be angry, fierce, unforgiving. He would fight, not surrender; he would grow flinty and then impenetrable. Hannibal would have to break his way in. He liked Will as he was: bold, wilful, unshackled by doubt. He liked his candidness, the soft belly he rolled over and trustingly teased with. The things they shared, the private thoughts and obsessions, the intimacy of their days, all would be gone. Hannibal might as well gut him and spend the rest of their lives with only the opprobrium of his scar for company: *à la recherche du temps perdu.*

When they shared a bed, Will's instinct was to seek the warmth and shelter of Hannibal's body. Even when asleep - pushing his face into the crook of Hannibal's neck, into his shoulder; arms winding, pulling Hannibal closer; threading his shins through Hannibal's own. And when he was awake he was impossible to ignore - provocative and demanding, always playful; then after deadly serious. He searched Hannibal's body thoroughly for meaning, used it for his own greedy ends, made space for himself there. He swam in the tunnels of his veins, peered out from the gaps between his ribs. He lived in the muscles and sinews of his heart. Hannibal gave him everything, everything, and took just as much back.

Fuck me, Will said. *Suck me.* Or, *Let me fuck you.* Or, *Put your tongue there.* Or simply, *Yes. Yes. Yes.* Hannibal liked it: it was brutal, honest. Honeyed words had no place in their bed - they were a distraction from a deeper truth, one felt in the body like ravening hunger. It was not polite; it rocked and moaned and was sticky with semen, it roared and thrust and fucked. There were sweat and curses and prayers, equal in weight and meaning, delivered with the same angry joy. Sometimes there was laughter, tears, both.

The last time had been on the sofa, in the ashes of evening. Will had bathed and changed; he wore little, some shorts, a vest, and smelled of sweet almonds. His limbs gleamed when caught by the low light cast from the lamps. He was talking, constructing a future, knitting it all together in his mind. Hannibal was awestruck by how simple it could be: friends, pizza, movies. He was talking about living there, with Hannibal, making this his permanent home. There was a hesitation in his voice, too; it sounded a sweet note, one which hoped, which wanted. Hannibal had pulled him into his lap; Will was laughing, even as he was kissed, laughing and winding his arms round Hannibal's shoulders. The cant of his hips were accommodating, deliberate. He let Hannibal grind against him, slowly, lewdly. He wanted it. He wanted it all.

His shorts were thin, flimsy and cheap, stretched tight around the globe of his ass. Will shucked them off, exposing himself, his lovely cock pink and wet. Hannibal unbuttoned his pants and pulled out his own length for Will's smiling inspection. A grin, a flash like sunlight on rippling water; then movement, the taut seam between Will's cheeks a channel for blunt and vulgar flesh. His cock slotted neatly in the groove Will had provided; rutting and rubbing, a chase of sensation, withholding and generous all at once. Grunts and moans followed; the softness and heat of skin; the mingling of sweat and fluids. Will, with his elbows planted on the back of the sofa, either side of Hannibal's head, leveraging himself, muscles working, displaying the smooth youthfulness of his arms and shoulders and chest. The thin strap of the vest dangling free; the lace edging pale against his flushed skin. Curls of damp hair on his neck. Mouth open, white teeth and pink tongue. A perfect Ganymede - who could begrudge Zeus his crimes?

Hannibal came; Will gasped, grinned, showed his teeth: the sensation is one of his favourites. He was moving still, sliding and rubbing Hannibal's cock against him, a torture of sensation which Hannibal cherished. A smiling sadist, his mouth soft and open. He sat back on his heels, releasing Hannibal to soften in peace. His thighs were slick and wet, globules of seminal fluid clinging, slipping, dripping. He stroked himself - for his own pleasure, for Hannibal. He enjoys being watched: sure fingers gloried in the jut of his cock, squeezing, stroking. Hannibal breathed as though his own climax had not passed. There was coaxing, teasing. More wetness. Will pushed up his vest impatiently and pinched a nipple between his fingers. He tugged, watching Hannibal watching him. Hannibal imagined it between his teeth, imagined making it hurt. The colour was high in Will's face; his eyes bright, glazed, warm and loving, as he said: *I'm going to ruin your shirt*. Part warning, part a declaration of intent. Part threat. Hannibal bared his teeth in a grin. *Ruin it,* he said. *Ruin me.* And Will had.

Hannibal closed his eyes, pulse thudding behind his ear. The sound was loud in the cavern of his skull, the ache in his groin acute. He lifted the wine to his nose again; the heady richness of its bouquet drew him away from the thick scent of Will's arousal, from the sharp bitterness of come splashed across his shirt. Will was not there.

But he was coming, getting ever closer as the minutes ticked by. And the envelope waited, its patience adding insult to his injury. He must go upstairs and deal with it. There was still time.

Will would have met with Bedelia again that afternoon. Hannibal hadn't been overly concerned at first, though he would've preferred to have introduced them, during a convenient public outing. He'd found himself curious about the outcome, her intentions. She thought she'd out-maneuvered him somehow; she'd been avoiding him. Always a sign of the guilty. He knew he must haunt their conversations like a silent spectre - of what did they speak? Will was clever but he didn't hold enough cards - how well would he play without them?

He *must* go upstairs. Hannibal took the note from the envelope and read it again: Grutas was dead. Annoyance was now his chief emotion; annoyance and a sense of being cheated. Oblivion had taken him - his suffering had been minimal. A blow to the head, delivered by a fellow inmate; unconscious for thirty hours, followed by seamless death. Hannibal pursed his lips and took an unhappy sip of wine. Perhaps he could send an anonymous gift to this murderer. Something double-edged, something the other prisoners would covet. If he managed to survive Hannibal might be able to concede to him the experience of killing Grutas. Maybe.

So the note must be a stand-in, an immolation all of its own. He set down his glass and rose to standing. The kitchen fell back into its proper proportions, no longer excluding him from its stage. Light glowed softly at its edges, the cabinets looming dark and the gleam of polished steel beneath. Hannibal frowned, newly pained. There would be no sacrifice made here. That was extremely dissatisfactory; something boiled restively in his chest. Maybe a substitute could be made here as well: the butcher-beast from the farmers market leapt to mind.

He took up the note but a sound penetrated the stillness of the kitchen before he could move. A scratch, a key turning in a lock. A footstep, and a door softly closing.

Will. It was Will.

He was home.

Chapter End Notes

Amarone is what Hannibal drinks with the liver and fava beans in the SOTL book, but it was changed for the film. I got most of the tasting notes from openingabottle.com - very helpful as that shit is expensive!

Bedelia's question to Will about Hare, the Badlands movie and Sissy Spacek's character is a bit double-edged. Hare invented the famous psychopathy checklist (still used by the FBI) and I guess you could probably call him the godfather psychopathy studies?? If you'd like to know why it's an interesting thing to put in front of Will, here's a short well-written article which is much, much better than me trying to explain.

If you're enjoying this fic and would like to share with your followers, here is this chapter on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Well, I hope you all enjoy suspense!?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will took out his key and unlocked the door. Hannibal's foyer was waiting inside, silently accusing and shrouded in its own still dark. It was half past four: Hannibal would be at his office, unaware of Will's early return. He felt like an interloper, there under false pretences, and with no clue what he was going to do. He'd only known he had to come.

Will stood for a moment, trying to decide on his next course of action. The sun was dimming outside, dipping to hide behind thick clouds; a little burst of light struggled to brighten the room and then receded again, leaving everything in a grey gloom. His options were narrow. He could make a half-hearted attempt to snoop, looking through Hannibal's private things, for evidence and explanations which he knew wouldn't be there. Or he could wait, agitated and heartsick, for Hannibal to come home.

Both were unappealing. *He wasn't afraid, and he didn't need saving,* he told himself, but he was and he might. It was fear he'd come here to confront. Fear of the truth of himself. What had he known? If Hannibal were to unveil himself, would he find he recognised the man underneath?

Will left his bag in its usual place by the coatstand - when he moved the sound of his boots on the floor was muffled and strange - then peered forward into the dimness of the house. He didn't go inside. Bev had been wrong: the house was not a castle. It was enclosed, suffocating; sepulchral in its silence. The entrance to a labyrinth, and Will knew something was something buried at its heart.

Few details of Kolnas' murder had been released. The newspaper reports had swerved any description of the body but all had used the word 'mutilated'. He'd learned a little about Kolnas himself - the crimes he'd committed, the ones he was still suspected of. He'd lived a sordid life of robbery and fraud, associated with a gang of traffickers. The neighbourhood restaurant he'd opened had been funded with laundered money. He was survived by a wife and child, about whom no details were given. Until he'd found it, Will had struggled to imagine what link could exist between Hannibal and Kolnas. But there it had been, just a minor note in a sea of text: Kolnas had been born in Lithuania, just like Hannibal.

He wondered if Alana had noticed that detail too.

Then something pricked at his skin: a tingle of awareness, a sudden certainty. He'd heard a sound, one so quiet it was hardly a noise at all. Will froze as a shadow detached itself from the wall by the stairs and slowly resolved into a dark statue filling the entrance to the hallway: Hannibal. A slant of light fell across his face; Will's breath caught in his throat. It was as Alana had described, something had slipped from his expression. But more than that - he looked at Will as if he didn't quite recognise him.

For a long moment they simply stood there, like they were both seeing each other for the first time.

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal said. “It’s early for you to be home.” He didn’t move from the doorway.

Will forced himself to speak but it sounded a poor approximation of his old, irreverent self. “It’s early for you, too.”

Hannibal hung back, his face as still as a mask. He seemed undecided about what to do next, but soon his expression flickered and he strode forward. His hand met Will’s face, softly cupping his palm against his cheek. Agonisingly, the touch of his hand felt the same as it always did; Will tried to stare him down calmly, and without flinching.

“Friday is your day for Dr Du Maurier,” Hannibal said. “You must’ve come straight here from your appointment.”

Something unspooled and slithered, deep in Will’s mind. Around them was a spreading shadow, spilling out like black blood across the floor. *He knew.* He knew what Dr Du Maurier had told him. He’d been expecting it, maybe even waiting for this moment to come.

Will’s expression must have answered Hannibal better than words. He scanned Will’s face at speed and took a slow breath. “So it’s happened,” he said. “Dr Du Maurier has spoken.”

He stepped back and offered his hand, as if requesting a dance. He even smiled, but Will didn’t trust it. It was brittle around the edges, glassy as melting ice.

“You came here to know the truth of me,” Hannibal said. “Didn’t you?”

Will fought for his voice. It almost failed him but he managed to dredge out some words. “I came here to understand.”

It was the right thing to say. A flicker of softness passed over Hannibal; his eyes were suddenly bright with unshed tears. The fingers he held out convulsed once, beckoning. Impulsively, Will reached out and grabbed hold of them. Before he surrendered it, his own hand was shaking.

Hannibal’s fingers were cold but strong; his remained face inscrutable. They went together, hand in hand, inside the dark house and up the stairs.

*

Will couldn’t remember getting to the attic. It was only afterwards that he truly understood it was a real place and not a creation of his own mind. Later, much later, this dream-like impression still lingered. He only visited it once and the experience seemed to become that of a shared hallucination; one created by grief and intense emotion and the strength of his connection to Hannibal.

After the peculiar coldness of Hannibal’s fingers, the next thing Will noticed were the stairs. They were wooden, steep and slatted, and made a flat and lifeless sound as he climbed them. Hannibal followed behind, silent and grave as death, but even without him Will still would’ve continued up. He’d passed beyond fright and into numbness - moving was better than not moving. When he ascended through the hatch in the floor and found himself in a well-furnished room, he felt a strange lightness settle upon him. It took him a long time to recognise it as relief.

The room, although unknown to him, was immediately familiar. It occupied what must have been all of the available attic space in the house and was open to the rafters above. This, and its large proportions, gave it a chapel-like appearance. The airy grandness of its pitched ceilings, alongside the furnishings and layout, were reminiscent of Hannibal's office. At one end was a large desk, and there were chairs and small tables grouped at intervals, as if to provide seating for visitors. This supplied Will with his second, and strongest, impression, which was that of a museum. The room was a host for objects of all kinds: they jostled in cabinets and on shelves; they parleyed with each other from neighbouring tables. The paintings and pictures and tapestries arranged over the walls seemed to join in too.

Hannibal's voice softly filled the room. "This is a hall of memories." To Will it seemed like he'd spoken directly into his own mind.

He swung round; Hannibal was standing at the top of the steps, from where he'd been observing Will's tentative reactions.

"I wondered how long it would be before I saw you here," Hannibal said. "I knew it would happen, eventually."

There was something unexpected in the air. Will grappled for it, but it was dense and slippery; difficult to catch and even more difficult to understand. Something deeper than sorrow, something intricate and fragile and all the more dangerous for it.

"You wanted to show me your memories?" Will said, frowning, straining for clarity.

He'd hoped Hannibal would reveal a little more, but he didn't. Instead he walked over to the desk, footsteps echoing sombrely, and sat down behind it.

"You came here to understand," Hannibal said. He waved a hand to indicate the room. "So understand."

He selected a sheet of paper from a pile on the desk and a pencil, and coolly transferred his attention to sketching.

Will hesitated, incredulous. The pencil tip scratching on paper was the only sound in the room - the silence and stillness surrounding it were unbearable. He knew what Hannibal expected from him but it seemed impossible. He also knew that as soon as he turned his back, Hannibal would be watching.

Will took a step forward, and then another and another. Moving around was easier than trying to stay still and look calm. Panic was beginning to return, creeping in around the edges of his numbness: there was a thrumming sensation building in his chest, pulsing fear around his body. *Why this? Why play games?* he asked himself, as he looked round unseeingly.

The answer came to him quickly: there was something Hannibal wanted him to know but, for whatever reason, he couldn't tell Will himself. Somewhere there was a key that could unlock the words which couldn't be spoken. And, as if trapped in a fairytale, Will was supposed to find it.

He glanced around, trying not to work too hard to find meaning in the objects he passed. There were no obvious connections between them, anyway, and nor did they seem to be arranged in a particular order. He thought back to Hannibal's office and the first time he'd seen it. Then he'd been curious, he'd wanted to know Hannibal more intimately than conversation would've allowed.

This was the same. *He wasn't afraid and he didn't need saving.* Just pay attention and let his mind do its work.

On a nearby table was a lamp of carved ivory. Ranged along the wall not far away were a selection of vases glazed in a glossy shade of eggplant - Will's rudimentary knowledge, gleaned from the many times he'd accompanied Hannibal to antiques shops, told him they were probably Chinese. Above them was an engraving of a fortified castle; the high wall which surrounded it was intact but its central towers were crumbling with age. A porcelain figure of a shepherdess with a lamb was placed alone on a dresser, and beside it a pale blue cushion on a chair upholstered with yellow silk sang out in glowing watercolour tones.

Will paused and went back, frowning, to the shepherdess. It was delicately coloured and probably older than it seemed - the little lamb sat on a tussock of grass, gazing up at the shepherdess, innocence guided by innocence. It was sentimental, nearly pious. It was all wrong; completely out of step with Hannibal's tastes.

He looked around the room again, searching for other items which stood out. Nothing else was as obviously out of place but there were things which were lacking the refinement and quality which Hannibal habitually demanded. There was a pair of Victorian shadow boxes, one filled with wax fruit, and the other with an arrangement of shells which resembled a bowl of flowers; both were sad and faded with a handmade look. There was a small silver jewellery box, pretty but scratched and rather cheap. Will opened it but there was nothing inside, only torn blue velvet. The tapestries made Will pause, too. They were reproductions, medieval in style. In one a wimpled lady was making a wreath of roses, while a monkey by her side smelled a dropped flower. The other was harder to understand - another lady, perhaps the same one, had taken off her necklace and was placing it in a box. There was nothing like them in the entire house.

The paintings close to where Will stood were all on the small side, mainly watercolours and oils; flowers featured prominently. And there were prints, too, of Dutch still lifes, piled with rosy-looking apples and berries, or stacked sobrely with weighty rounds of cheese. Will walked along, looking at each in turn, until he came to a display of Hannibal's own drawings, hanging in a group. Some were familiar to him - Hannibal's school in Paris, the Piazza del Duomo of Florence. Some were of ordinary houses and streets, sketched economically and, as far as Will could tell, with what seemed to be complete accuracy. Some seemed to be medical illustrations of the kind which won him his internship. One was a diagram of a flayed shoulder, another a cross-section of a torso with the lungs and heart exposed. At the end of the row was a faithful copy of the Wound Man - Will remembered Hannibal showing it to Bev after the dinner they'd shared.

Below that was a small case of books: all were for children. There were antique picture books, illustrated fairy stories, nature guides to European wildflowers and butterflies. One read in cracked gold lettering *A Child's History of Art*. Will glanced towards Hannibal, still bent over his sketching. If this was a room of memories were these books from his childhood?

Will turned back to the Wound Man and remained in front of it for some time. Hannibal had raised it before his eyes twice now - was it a motif of some kind? He looked again at the medical drawings hung beside it, chewing his lip. There was something persistent about their presence, something gloating.

His head was starting to hurt. The room held too much information, too many allusions and associations. Too much to think about. Will looked around for a seat; the nearest was almost in a corner, under a pair of oil paintings. Both appeared to show the same view; Will recognised it as the

Bridge of Sighs. As he got closer he realised they were old, very old - the paint was cracked and fragile, yellowed in places. A prickle ran over his skin as he realised what they were; that they were important, and not just to art history. Beneath them, standing almost casually, was a plain tall table on which a pot plant wouldn't have looked out of place. On it was a glass dome, and under the dome was a small piece of purple velvet and a tiny silver bracelet. A child's bracelet. A respectful distance from it lay the buttonhole, long dried, that Hannibal had worn at their wedding.

If, Will's brain supplied, *you had something so special you couldn't speak of it, wouldn't you hide it? Even in this maze of associations.*

The room became very close and dark; the walls narrowed, the ceiling retreated. Will reached and reached for what it all meant but, whatever it was, it was just out of--

"You've always known how to find your way to the very heart of me."

Hannibal's voice was very close, right by Will's ear. Will froze: he hadn't heard a single movement, a single footstep.

"How did you know?"

Will glance at him was wary, but Hannibal's attention was fixed on the bracelet. He sounded genuinely curious.

"The paintings," Will said, faintly. "They're originals, aren't they? And then I saw the buttonhole and the-" He stopped abruptly, his breath coming hard as if he'd been running. He wanted to sit but instead he struggled on, gesturing at the bracelet. "Something that important would be hidden in plain sight," he said. "It wouldn't be obvious, it wouldn't broadcast what it was."

Hannibal was watching him now, molten-amber eyes pinning Will to the spot. There was a short silence, which Will endured with silent dread. He knew what was coming. It was the reason they were there, standing in a hidden room he hadn't known existed.

Hannibal lifted the dome and picked up the bracelet. He held it up to the light, turning it gently to and fro, before setting it down in Will's waiting hands. Will breathed quietly, slowly. He hardly dared touch it. The band was thin, thinner than Will's wedding ring, and so small he could've worn it on two fingers.

"Do you now know why this room exists, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will shut his eyes. Yes, he knew. The knowledge rushed to him, bubbling over with borrowed grief. He bent his head over the bracelet.

"Your sister," he said. It came out like a sob. "It wasn't an accident."

Hannibal reaction was all but invisible. "This is all I have left of her," he said, tucking the bracelet back into its bed of velvet.

Lots of things were now aligning in Will's mind. He felt dizzy with it; his legs were weak. "May I?" he asked, pointing towards the chair in the corner.

Concern now clouded Hannibal's brow, as if he'd only just noticed Will's distress. He led Will over to the chair and then knelt by his side.

“Those paintings hung in my mother’s room,” he said, nodding towards the paired pictures. “I rescued what little I could from galleries and auction rooms. Some things are copies, reproductions. The rest is whimsy; things she might have enjoyed.”

His face was clear now, almost untroubled. Will watched him dazedly, thinking of the Wound Man, and the other drawings he’d made and placed in the inner part of her shrine. Whatever Hannibal said, it was only some of the truth. There was much more to come; this was the heart of something much bigger.

“Let me fetch you some water,” Hannibal said, feeling Will’s forehead. He rose and crossed the room to a cabinet by the desk. There were bottles in there, glasses too. “I’m sorry I kept this place from you,” he said. “I was hoping I wouldn’t need it for much longer. But I had some unfortunate news today - it seems a promise I made now cannot be kept.”

He brought back a bottle of mineral water and poured a little into a glass. Will took it and drank, his mouth dry. His thoughts raced, trying to keep up. He had to speak, to keep Hannibal talking. He mustn’t succumb to fear.

Will cradled the glass on his knee, gripping it for the illusion of steadiness it gave to his hand. “Broken promises are dents in the armour of our honour,” he said. “How big a dent is this, Hannibal? Has it pierced the skin?”

Hannibal gracefully lowered to sit on the floor beside Will, his arm resting on one bent leg. “I was pierced a long time ago,” he said. “The wounds healed, but badly.”

Will paused, searching for the right thing to say. “Scar tissue,” he said, after a moment. “Will you show me?”

Hannibal looked at him, a long flat gaze, and then stood again. Will felt a chill; he’d managed to catch a glimpse of the Hannibal he knew but he wasn’t sure what else was in there.

“Let’s go downstairs,” Hannibal said. “You’ve had a shock, you should eat.”

Will tried to pull himself together but was only partially successful. He felt so tired. Hannibal hoisted Will to his feet and offered his arm. Will took it as meekly as an invalid.

“I’ll make you something while we talk in the kitchen,” Hannibal was saying. “I try to only keep pleasant recollections here. No scars.”

They’d reached the top of the steps. Hannibal paused, solicitous.

“Can you manage?” he asked. “The steps are steep and your hand is shaking.”

Will nodded with grim determination. He reached for the handrail and made his way slowly down into the darkness. Only then did Hannibal follow.

*

“Here, drink this.” Hannibal set a glass down at Will’s elbow. It was stacked with ice cubes jostling in a honey-coloured liquid. Bruised mint leaves sat on top.

Will sniffed it cautiously, then once again to make sure. Peach iced tea.

“I’m not quite happy with the recipe,” Hannibal said. “But the sugar will help you feel better. Perhaps you can suggest something to improve it?”

He waited until Will had taken a sip, standing over his chair. Recognition flooded Will when he tasted it - it was his mother’s, only better.

“If you want it to taste like her’s you’re going to have to try less hard,” Will said. His voice felt hoarse in his throat - he took a bigger swallow of tea. “I told you, my mother’s not that much of a cook.” He heard himself and paused, remembering why he was being waited on, that Hannibal had somehow moved outside of his understanding. Will had much to learn before he could begin to predict him again. More politely, more cautiously, he said, “It’s delicious, thank you.”

Hannibal only laughed. Possibly he was simply pleased about the tea, but maybe also reassured that Will was showing some of his old self. He was difficult to read; outwardly he was now behaved much like the Hannibal Will knew, but it seemed thin, as if it masked something which had retreated inside.

“Drink up while your pasta cooks,” Hannibal said. “Some plain carbohydrate will do you good.”

Will nodded wordlessly, like a good and grateful patient. Probably Hannibal was right - eating would help. His exhaustion was bone-deep, his head and arms and legs felt weighted and clumsy. There was a cloudiness in his mind too but vigilance still crouched within. He peered out from its fog, alert, awake to potential dangers.

“I’m not sure how much I can eat,” Will said, eyeing both the bubbling pan and Hannibal’s zeal to take care of him. “I feel a little nauseous. But I’ll try.”

“Just a little is all you need.” Hannibal said, both approving and encouraging. “I’ll serve it plain, with a little oil and seasoning.”

Will drank his tea slowly. Silence reigned in the kitchen as Hannibal methodically worked; chopping herbs, cleaning knives, wiping surfaces. The light was soft, almost comforting; Will shrugged back the blanket Hannibal had draped across his shoulders. He’d been shivering with cold when they’d reached the bottom of the stairs. *Just shock*, Hannibal had said. *Rest, keep warm, you’ll soon be fine.* He did feel better, and the shivering had subsided, but Hannibal had said nothing about the cause of Will’s shock. Neither of them had spoken of the attic room since they left it, though Will felt like a part of him was still up there, roaming its strange avenues, touching its melancholy treasures. Still looking for answers. All he could do was wait and, in the meantime, gather back his strength.

Hannibal served the pasta, a small portion in a shallow bowl. He made no attempt to move Will into the dining room. Instead he leaned against the butcher’s block and watched as Will obediently ate.

The first mouthful made Will’s stomach roll uneasily, but nausea slowly gave way to hunger. Those two sensations seemed to dance either side of a fine line - repulsion at the thought of chewing and swallowing became a craving for salt and oil and the plain nourishment of the pasta. Once Will had finished the bowl, Hannibal spoke again.

“Did you find the understanding you sought? Your reaction suggests so.”

“Very little is clear,” Will said. “Even you. I thought I knew you so well.” The thought burst upon him without warning - he’d been trying to keep any traces of self-pity at bay. He’d allowed himself to go right up to the brink of seeing Hannibal clearly but had refused to go any further. That any of this could be a shock was all his own fault.

Hannibal’s face was grave, granite-carved. “Nothing you know of me is a lie,” he said. “And I think you know more than you let yourself admit.” There was a silence; they gazed at each other across its gulf. “I wonder how you managed with Dr Du Maurier today? She obviously had something of interest to tell.”

Will wiped away a futile tear; a harsh laugh escaped him. “She *told* me almost nothing,” he said. “She’d make a great lawyer.”

“And she convinced you of much,” Hannibal said.

Will remembered Alana, her palpable fear. Would Dr Du Maurier have been so convincing without her anxious warnings? Swiftly, he made a decision to keep Hannibal in the dark about that. It would be much, much better for her if he never found out about his lunch with Alana.

“Because Dr Du Maurier herself is convinced,” he said. “She’s so convinced she’s upped and left. Told me no one who went looking would find her.”

“And yet you came straight here,” Hannibal said. “To me.”

Will met his eyes and nodded. He knew what that meant, now; what he’d chosen.

But Hannibal gave him an odd smile. “You’re contradicting yourself, Will,” he said. He stood upright and moved, slowly circling Will’s chair. “Do you believe you know me better than Dr Du Maurier does, or not?”

“I know things she doesn’t, in ways she can’t know them,” Will said. “I know you love me; I know what that feels like. I know all the things you’ve said and done, how genuine they were, how much you meant them.” He paused, aware of Hannibal behind him. “But now I see how big the gaps are in my knowledge,” he said. “A better question would be to ask what Dr Du Maurier knows that I don’t.”

Hannibal moved round into Will’s field of vision again. He perched on the chair arm and cradled Will into his side.

“Bedelia doesn’t know everything,” he said. “I showed her a little; in our time together we enjoyed our roles and played them well. She was curious, you see.” He released Will to look down into his upturned face. “Curious what would happen. And so was I.”

“And she blinked first,” Will said, warming to his role. “I haven’t blinked - show me those scars, Hannibal. What happened to Mischa?”

For a few moments, Hannibal said nothing. Will held his breath, wondering if he’d pushed it too far, too fast. When Hannibal did speak, it was slowly, and his words formed well-structured sentences.

“I allowed you to believe that my sister died in the accident which killed our parents,” he said. “That’s not the truth of what happened.”

A hush descended, filling Will up from the outside in. His heart seemed to still utterly, ceasing its rhythm. He waited, not daring to interrupt.

“The accident was quite prosaic,” Hannibal said. “It happens to many people, each and every day. A car collided with ours. My father was driving - he was killed instantly, crushed by the impact. My mother was thrown onto the grass next to the wheel. I can’t be sure but I think she was dead before the engine caught fire. By then I had smashed the rear window and crawled out, dragging Mischa with me. I remember watching my mother’s dress burn while we waited for someone to find us.”

Will listened in horror, thinking that none of what Hannibal described was prosaic. He’d known nothing of this - he’d never asked for any details. Why hadn’t he? Out of delicacy or had Hannibal discouraged it?

“It was soon arranged for us to be taken to an orphanage. There we were to wait until our uncle could be contacted. There was some trouble about locating him - the official channels were always slow, needlessly bureaucratic, and a couple of orphaned children were hardly a high priority.

“At the orphanage we would be separated. Mischa was almost still a baby - she knew what had happened but couldn’t comprehend it. She was fretful, she had bad dreams, refused to eat. I didn’t want them to take her so we ran away. It wasn’t far to the lodge where our family had lived, on the edge of the old castle. The estate had been confiscated long ago to be used as an agricultural college, but by then it was abandoned, the castle uninhabitable and the forest wild. Once, the police came looking but we hid in the woods. I wasn’t worried about the future - sooner or later our uncle would arrive, and I knew I could look after us until then.”

Hannibal halted, momentarily lost in the past. He was perfectly composed, though, his seat beside Will relaxed. He could have been telling nothing more than a story.

“My memories of that time are shattered,” he said. “Only fragments remain; in them time itself is jumbled. I remember picking berries, sunlight shining through leaves. I remember a group of men at the edge of the clearing. I remember a young deer lying twitching, a bullet wound in its side. I remember being locked in the dark of the attic. I remember snow on the ground, biting cold and hunger. I remember Mischa’s screams as they took her away.”

Hannibal turned his face to Will’s. His face was clear and open. “When my uncle arrived I was alone,” he said. “The men had gone and Mischa was no longer there.”

Will’s horror crested; his stomach churned. Though Hannibal’s tone was even, he felt every word like a blow.

“They took me back to Paris with them,” Hannibal said. “I’d forgotten how to speak but it mattered less than you might think - I could always make myself understood, particularly around my aunt. Later I learned how much time had passed in those woods. As I grew memories began to surface, glimpses and clues. I worked hard to unearth them and through them I discovered what they’d done to her.”

He stopped, his gaze blank and far away. Will was forced to ask - he couldn’t help himself.

“What?” he whispered. “What did they do?”

“They killed her for food,” Hannibal said.

Will's gasp was shocked, disbelieving; Hannibal watched his reaction distantly.

"They were trapped, we all were, in that freezing winter," he said. "They came to hide from the authorities until it was safe to move on, but the snow came and it was merciless. We had no food. They grew weak, too weak to escape; desperate to survive. So they took her and ate her, like they ate that deer. They traded her life for the hoard of contraband they'd dragged with them over the border - it was more valuable to them than she was."

The silence around them was profound. Will couldn't speak; his hands had found Hannibal's, clasping them; the fine bones of his knuckles and wrists were pressed to Will's palms.

"Once I'd regained my speech I became a schoolboy like any other," Hannibal said. "Much of the rest of my history you know."

But I don't know, Will thought. *I don't know anything.* The contrast between the mute young boy Hannibal had described and the man before him was startling. What had happened in between?

"I found those men," Hannibal said. "I tracked them all down, through assumed names and criminal identities, save for one. He was much harder to find and about ten years ago I learned why. He was serving a lengthy sentence in a Russian prison - he was due for parole next year."

Will swallowed down his terror. "What did you do with them?" he asked. He already knew but he needed to hear Hannibal say it.

Hannibal's look was quick and appraising. "I killed them, of course," he said. He didn't elaborate.

Will's head was spinning. "And the man in prison, the one you said was due for parole. What happened to him?"

A flash of something crossed Hannibal's face; sadness, regret. Annoyance. "He escaped me," he said. "A fight with another inmate: a blow to the head, coma, then death. He slipped off this mortal coil with disappointing ease."

Will was still holding onto Hannibal's hands, gripping them. He gripped harder, waiting, dreading.

"Vladis Grutas was his name," Hannibal said. "He was the leader of the group. It was his decision. He killed her with an axe."

There was a longer pause, and a roaring in Will's ears. He could see it so clearly - the crunch of bone, the spray of blood. Just a baby and half-starved - hardly enough to feed a group of men.

And he could see more: Hannibal's actions were not ones of revenge, simple crimes of passion. It went deeper than that; he was cold and controlled, he'd planned for years. It would have been… aesthetic, somehow. Orchestrated for effect. There was the attic, too; the shrine to Mischa's memory. For that, he would have needed a souvenir.

"Was that what you were going to do to him?" Will asked. He surprised himself; his voice sounded quite steady. "Kill him with an axe in return?"

Hannibal considered the question as carefully as a wine menu. "It had crossed my mind," he said. "Reduce him in increments, starting with the limbs. But difficult to manage with an axe - such

traumatic wounds would've made it difficult to keep him alive for long. It's hard to know what sort of condition he'd be in after such a time in prison - lean, I expect, and not very healthy."

"What did you take from them?" Will whispered.

He'd finally reached the threshold of his understanding. There were no souvenirs in the attic, only drawings. He thought of Mischa, the axe, the starving men. For Hannibal it was important for Kolnas to remain alive, so he could know what was done to him as it was being done. *Contrapasso*: hadn't Hannibal said that as a young man he'd been a keen student of Dante?

"Different things each time," Hannibal answered, matter-of-factly. "Heart, liver, cheeks. They took my sister from me and I took her back, piece by piece."

Blackness was pressing in at the corners of Will's vision. He blinked; the scene before him glittered with lights which he knew weren't there. All at once he became painfully conscious of where he was. He hadn't gone missing or been kidnapped; no one was going to come looking for him should he not return. He was where everyone expected him to be: sitting in his husband's kitchen, listening to his murderous tales of brutality and cannibalism.

Hannibal's face had changed; it might've shown sympathy, even distress, but Will's tears had blurred everything into a liquid smear. He could feel Hannibal bending over him, kissing the top of his head, but Will couldn't move, not even to wipe his eyes. Muddled sounds reached him, as if he'd slipped underwater. Slowly, he became aware that Hannibal was speaking and he struggled to listen. With effort, the meaning came to him. He watched the shape of Hannibal's words, the movements of his cruel and beautiful mouth, and realised he was asking for advice. The promise he'd been unable to keep: *what now?* he asked, over and over. *What do I do now?*

But Will's mind was swimming with panic; only one thought occupied it.

"What about me?" he asked. His body seemed too heavy, his head lolled on top of his neck - he couldn't hold it upright. "What are you going to do about me?"

Hannibal came briefly into focus. He was frowning down at Will, like he didn't understand the question. He opened his mouth again to speak, but Will couldn't hear his words, couldn't focus on his face. He blinked once, his vision slipped and fell away, and then there was nothing but darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's attic: the sets/exterior shots of Hannibal's house suggest there isn't space for an attic but for this fic let's just pretend there is (actually, a bit like the Overlook Hotel, the layout of Hannibal's house doesn't quite make sense, so I feel shoving an extra room in where it doesn't really belong is okay??)

And don't ask me how Hannibal's mother managed to keep hold of those paintings but she did, and that's because Hannibal really does need this sort of cultural-luxe-tragedy stuff in his background to make sense of who he later becomes. (Also one day we really must talk about Hannibal and his mother because WELL - there is a lot unsaid there, I mean, his memory

palace begins building with her bedroom and all it's beautiful feminine objects?? - and I'd argue she's as influential on him as Mischa???)

If you're enjoying this fic and would like to share with your followers, here is this chapter on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wakefulness crashed over Will like the turning tide. He sat bolt upright, kicking the sheets away until he was sitting, alone and panting for breath, in the middle of the bed. He'd been dreaming of manacles, of chains weighing him down. He checked his wrists and ankles; both were unfettered and unblemished. And the space beside him was blank - Hannibal had not slept there.

His temples throbbed with a dull pain. Will blinked a few times, trying to dislodge the clouds from his mind, but they were slow-moving and clung persistently to his thoughts. His mouth was achingly dry. He turned and looked about himself; there, on the nightstand, was a glass of water. Hannibal must have left it for him. Will frowned at the glass, feeling a stir of strong emotion and trying to identify the reason for it. How had he got there? He couldn't remember going to bed. He considered his bare knees and the thin red stripe of Hannibal's pyjama shirt which covered his arms and chest. It was his favourite one but he had no memory of putting it on.

Then, mouth set in a line, he seized hold of the water glass and swung himself out of bed. He banged into the bathroom, where he threw its contents down the sink. There he paused, leaning on the vanity for support, chasing his quickening breath.

Hannibal.

Will rinsed the glass out well before filling it up again from the faucet. He chugged it down and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand.

Hannibal. The attic. Blacking out. That was what he remembered.

Dimly, he was aware that he should be terrified. But he wasn't - he was furious beyond belief. Will ripped off the pyjama shirt and cast around for the clothes he'd worn the day before. He found them, carefully folded, on the ottoman at the end of the bed. He pulled them on and, as soon as he was decent, stormed out of the room and went looking for Hannibal.

He found him in the living room, frowning unhappily at the sketchbook in his lap. He'd changed his clothes and was brightly awake, without any of the softness of morning - only then did it occur to Will to wonder what time it was or how long he'd slept.

"Do you *want* me to be scared of you?" Will burst out. "Is that really what you'd like?"

Hannibal looked up and met his eyes, a little blank as if startled. Will felt satisfaction at the sight, let it fill him up with righteous anger.

"I can either be afraid of you or I can love you," Will said, folding his arms. "I can't do both. It's up to you which it is."

Hannibal didn't answer directly but inclined his head, conceding the point with reluctance. It came to Will that that had probably never occurred to him before, or that, if it had, not phrased so baldly.

"I mean it, Hannibal," he said. "Drug me again and you've lost me. Understand?"

Hannibal sighed and set down his pencil. “You were upset, you needed to rest-” He broke off at the look on Will’s face; his own tightened imperceptibly. “Yes, I understand,” he said. “Next time I’ll seek your permission first.”

“There will *not* be a next time,” Will said, jabbing his finger for emphasis. “What was it in? The tea?”

“No, the water,” Hannibal said. He held Will’s eyes, not in the least ashamed.

“Fuck.” Will had to turn away from him for a moment and press a hand to his eyes. His head pounded with frustration. The water - that was before Hannibal had even begun to tell his story. He’d decided on his course of action while they were still in the attic. “What was it supposed to do,” he said. “Make me more manageable? Keep me quiet until you figured ouit what to do with me?”

He whipped round to Hannibal again. He was watching Will with interest, hands clasped lightly in his lap, legs crossed.

“You seem angrier about the sedative than you are about my crimes,” he said.

Will clenched his fists. “You really are fucking unbelievable,” he said. “I’m *angry* because I just found out my *husband’s* a *serial killer*.”

Infuriatingly, Hannibal just shrugged. “Technically, I have motive,” he said. “At the very least there’d be some debate about what to call me.”

“And what would you call yourself?” Will retorted. “We both know this isn’t simply about revenge. If you’d killed Grutas, would it really have been over by now?”

Hannibal looked away, a stubborn cant to his chin. “I would’ve kept my promise to Mischa.” He sounded like a sulky child.

Will swallowed - that wasn’t really an answer. “*Have* there been any others?” he asked, more tentatively. He moved closer and, almost against his will, found himself taking a seat opposite Hannibal. “Besides the ones you told me about.”

Hannibal stiffened a little. “I had a promise to keep,” he insisted.

“And did you think about what would happen after it was fulfilled?” Will leaned nearer, elbows planted on his knees. “After all, you’ve had a lot of time to think.”

“No,” Hannibal replied. “Hypotheticals are of no interest to me.”

Will, at a loss, almost gave up. Hannibal’s demeanor was open and nothing was concealed - he’d unlocked the doors and flung them wide but Will simply didn’t know how to deal with what lay beyond. It was entirely outside his experience.

He put his head in his hands and thought. The clock on the mantel ticked quietly on.

“The present isn’t hypothetical,” Will said at last, raising his head. “What are you planning to do now? What about me?”

Hannibal blinked once, emptily. “What about you?” he echoed. He closed the sketchbook and put it aside. “It would be more to the point to ask what your plans are.”

Will folded his arms across his chest. “Well, I can hardly go home,” he said. “If I did Bev would know something was wrong - assuming you’d even allow that. So I guess for now I’m here, trying understand exactly who it is I married.”

Hannibal flinched, very slightly. “You’re not a prisoner,” he said.

Will shook his head in disbelief. “No, I’m just a hostage of my own making,” he said. “And an accessory to several counts of murder too.”

“You’d only be an accessory if you kept my secrets,” Hannibal said. He brushed a fleck of lint from his pants and crossed his legs. “One little call to our friendly local law enforcement could soothe your troubled conscience.”

“You already know I can’t do that,” Will said. “You wouldn’t have told me had there been evidence.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Hannibal said. “Maybe I hold your loyalty in greater esteem than you think. Was I wrong? Would you betray me for the sake of those who killed Mischa?”

Will’s eyes narrowed. They were encroaching on dangerous ground now but he was past caring. “You never answered my question, did you?” he said. “Would Grutas have been the end of it? *Is* Grutas the end of it?”

Hannibal answer was calm but tension flexed in his jaw. “And you didn’t answer mine.”

Will leaned back in his chair and let out a long, exasperated breath. “You have to understand, Hannibal,” he said. “I have a lot to learn - and unlearn - about you.”

“I have never told you a lie,” Hannibal said. “Nothing you’ve seen of me has been untrue.”

It was that which tipped Will over the edge. He was tired still, exhausted and overwrought, and talking to Hannibal had never been this difficult. Tears, silent ones, spilled down his face. If only he could’ve stayed mad, without complication or nuance, without memories of happier times, surviving this conversation might have been easier.

“Were you going to tell me any of this or did you mean to keep it from me?” he said. “Fuck’s sake - you let me *marry* you, Hannibal! You let me believe in a shared future.”

He’d thought Hannibal dependable, a firm fixed point in his life. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“I haven’t stopped believing in our future,” Hannibal said. The accusation that Will had was barely veiled. He’d withdrawn his gaze, his eyes were cast down.

“You know what the difference between the past and the future is,” Will said, roughly wiping the tears from his face. “Did you really think you could keep your past and our future separate forever? That entropy wouldn’t affect us like it does everything else?”

Hannibal sighed and lay a protective hand on his sketchbook. “I hoped for a conclusion,” he said. “If the past cannot be undone, it can be contained and controlled.” He looked up at Will. “I hoped

you would understand, as you can understand so many things. Over time you encouraged me to think that you recognised me; that you saw me."

Will resolutely steered his mind away from that topic. He didn't want to look at it and he didn't acknowledge it. Instead he said: "You've been wanting to… *share* this with me?"

"I've never shared it with anyone," Hannibal said. "Bedelia had a glimpse, that was all. "

A silence fell while Will reflected on the facts he'd uncovered. Hannibal loved him and still wanted the future they'd talked about. Hannibal had killed; had done much more than kill. And another piece was emerging - Hannibal appeared to be at a loss, without the purpose which had so far steered him. In some ways he'd had a shock bigger than Will's. He had no answer for Will's questions about the present, which meant there was a chance he could be influenced - at least for now.

And there were things which Will couldn't avoid. He hadn't been shaken free of his love; instead he felt a sincere sadness on Hannibal's behalf. There was a ruin at his core; the entirety of his existence had been founded on its jagged stones. Hannibal had hewn himself out of nothing - when Will looked into that great, yawning void he felt compassion as well as horror, admiration as well as a disgust.

Also, Will knew he couldn't truly regret the men who'd died. He might regret other things but the fact of their death was not one of them.

"I won't tell anyone," he said finally. "Whatever happens between us, I won't betray you like that. I understand what it is that you've given me."

Hannibal accepted his promise with a slow nod. "Memories," he said. "I've given you family."

Will breathed slowly, in and out, then nodded too. He wanted to speak, to unravel that some more, but was too tired. So instead they sat together, quiet and unmoving, in the subdued daylight filtering through the blinds.

*

The hours that followed were strange and languorous. Hannibal showed an inclination to look after Will, so Will let himself be taken care of. He didn't know what else to do - it was the path of least resistance and he still felt unwell. At first he felt groggy, then simply weak and fatigued. It could have been a lingering effect of the shock he'd had, or a side-effect of the sedative, or perhaps he'd just not eaten enough. By the time Hannibal brought him lunch it was late afternoon - Will had discovered he'd been asleep all evening, all night and all morning, and consequently had missed at least three meals.

Once they'd stirred from their precarious truce, Hannibal had shepherded Will onto the couch and again had tucked him up in a blanket. There he'd brought a tray of food, one fit for an invalid. There was a delicate chicken broth filled out with noodles and a few frail vegetables. Will accepted the tray without protest; at least some of Hannibal's behaviour felt like an apology, or as close to one as he was capable of giving. Though he refused to be sorry for sedating Will, he certainly seemed to regret that doing so had caused Will discomfort. He fussed with Will's pillows; he checked his pulse and examined his pupils. He point-blank refused to allow Will any coffee, despite the throbbing headache which Will was sure was due to several missed doses of caffeine. Instead he set a jug of water and a glass by Will's side and instructed him to take small, regular sips.

At first, Will paused over the glass and threw Hannibal a mistrustful glance, but he drank from it anyway. He felt almost defiant - he'd already made his position clear. If Hannibal chose to call his bluff then they'd both have to live with the consequences.

Hannibal, in response, looked amused and satisfied in turn. He pulled a chair up close to Will's side and sat down in it. They didn't speak. Will was still eating - a light fruit salad served with a restrained drizzle of cream. Hannibal appeared absorbed in his reading and remained so, even under Will's frank scrutiny.

In Hannibal now there were all the things Will had long seen, only underscored by a new perspective. There was a stubborn and immovable quality to his bearing, one which gave an impression of great strength and resolution; an absolute stillness to his expressions and movements; an arrogant slant to his head and mouth. He was still beautiful - Will tried to cast him as a monster and found that he couldn't. Hannibal was too complex, unquantifiable - hating him would've been much less painful than whatever it was that Will felt for him now. He pulled his gaze back, widening his focus, trying to view him from a distance and tease apart his layers, and to his surprise discovered that Hannibal's presence by his side smacked of uncertainty. He hovered there, knowing Will was angry and refusing to accept responsibility for it, but longing for Will's forgiveness all the same.

Will knew something, then: that if Hannibal would only show remorse for something, anything at all; if he were to be contrite and really mean it, Will would not have hesitated in giving it to him. Forgiveness could easily have been his had he asked for it.

The truth wasn't shocking. Will received it calmly, facing up to the knowledge as best as he could. He'd known his love for Hannibal wasn't rational; that it was, at times, impulsive and overly passionate. What he hadn't known was that it was amoral, and selfish too.

The fruit salad was long finished. Will stretched out underneath the blanket; now, instead of a monster, all he saw when he looked was Hannibal sitting as near as he dared, making a plausible attempt to appear to be reading.

Will sighed loudly. "Come here," he said. "If I'm not a prisoner, then you're not a prison guard and you don't have to act like one."

Hannibal glanced up and raised an eyebrow at Will's tone.

"Just… Come here," Will said with an artless shrug.

He held out a hand, beckoning; Hannibal took it with excessive gentleness. Will half-expected him to bend his head and kiss it but he simply sat there, cradling it like a wounded bird.

"Are you afraid of me, Will?" he said. It seemed to be a genuine question, without barbs or derision. "Do I still have your love?"

Will frowned. "Can't just turn it on and off like a faucet." And, in a less gruff tone, he followed it up with: "No, I'm not afraid of you. I was, though, for a time. And I might be again - that depends on you."

Hannibal pressed his hand between his own, then moved to join him on the couch. Will rearranged the blanket around them and settled against him. The firm warmth of his side was a relief; Will

leaned into it and tried not to think, as if sheltering from a storm. It was just one small moment of comfort - surely he deserved that much.

Eventually though, he had to pull back. He couldn't put off thinking forever.

"You said you'd given me family," he said to Hannibal. "Tell me more about the attic - you called it a hall of memories."

"It was the only place I could make for her," Hannibal said. "I have many such halls in my memory palace but they were no good. There are holes in the floor of the mind, places I cannot safely tread. If I wished to visit her…" He trailed off with a gentle shrug.

"You had to put her somewhere out of reach," Will said. "Somewhere safe."

Hannibal nodded, silent.

"I saw your drawings there," Will said. "I assume they represent, more or less, the fate of her killers?"

Hannibal smiled, pleased. "More or less," he said.

Will halted; he was getting closer to the very thing he didn't want to do. But he had to - it was the only way he could see to move forward. The fragile peace of the afternoon would not last forever. "I need to understand," he said. "I need to know how you killed them. And then… And then what happened after. What you did with them."

Hannibal fell silent again, observing Will's reluctance with a critical mien.

"Why?" he said. "So you can be shocked all over again, appalled at yourself for loving me? So you can call me a monster and escape with your sense of self intact?"

Will was momentarily bewildered. He'd thought Hannibal would take his request as a compliment. "My imagination will fill in the gaps either way," he said. "It's better I know the truth."

"The truth is that it fascinates you but you cannot admit it," Hannibal said. "I'll show you anything you want if you'll answer me this honestly - if Grutas were still alive, would you help me kill him?"

Will's mouth fell open. "How can I possibly answer that?" he asked. "And how can you ask me it? I don't even know what you did with them, what you'd be asking me to do."

But Hannibal was intent on getting an answer. He leaned in, face close to Will's, his expression urgent. "If I left it up to you, then. If I let you decide how, let you choose. Would you help?"

Unable to respond, Will slowly shook his head in denial, in pure disbelief. What Hannibal asked seemed like madness.

"You're interested in violence," Hannibal persisted. "You've pursued the subject to an excellent school, towards a potentially glittering career. Jack knows. Jack knows how you hunger to get close to dangerous minds. He knows what a formidable bloodhound you'd make, even if he doesn't see why."

Will set his mouth in a firm line. He shook his head again, this time with determination. “You’ve forgotten something,” he said. “Much like manners, violence is often gendered. It’s a risky business being gender nonconforming - don’t assume you and I have the same perspective on violence. And *don’t* try and press your case like that, it’s clumsy and it’s beneath you.”

Hannibal was utterly unabashed but something glimmered in his eye. It might have been pride at Will’s mettle. All the same, Will thought it unlikely he’d heard the last of that particular topic.

“I don’t see you as a monster,” he said. “I don’t know how I see you. I’m finding it difficult to overlay what I know now over the version of you I knew before. That’s why I need you to show me.”

Hannibal was silent for a few moments, perhaps weighing up the consequences. He took Will’s hand again and this time bent over it, softly placing a kiss above his knuckles.

“Do you remember asking me where I would’ve liked to have married you?” he said.

“I remember,” said Will. “You said the Norman Chapel in Palermo. In my imagination I’ve been there a few times now.”

Hannibal’s smile was buoyant and light. “Then we will begin there,” he said. “That is the entrance to my memory palace - by way of its lighted halls we can go anywhere you choose.”

Despite himself, Will smiled back - though a little sardonically. “Let’s start with something easy?” he said. “Don’t want to get lost in there. Show me your memories of our first meeting.”

Hannibal clasped his hand tighter and tugged, as if about to conduct Will on a tour of an unfamiliar building.

“The room dedicated to you has been extended several times,” Hannibal said. “As it will only keep expanding, I will soon have to reconstruct. At present, though, we only have to ascend some stairs and throw open these doors.”

Will tried to imagine it: they stood in the centre of the aisle, facing the altar. Behind and to the sides were flights of stairs and then passageways beyond. These rushed by in a blur of shadow and candlelight until a pair of carved oak doors towered before them.

Curious about his surroundings, Will turned to gaze down the corridor he’d just been sped through. It was long - he couldn’t make out the end of it and there were shadowed openings in the walls.

“What are those doors?” he asked. “What’s behind them?” He laughed suddenly, meaningfully, and grinned. “Old flames?”

Hannibal turned around too. The oak doors had swung silently open; golden light spilled from them and lit his dark figure. Music could be heard, too, faint orchestral strains emanated from the room behind him. He returned Will’s grin. “Jealous?”

Will smiled sweetly back. “How big are *their* rooms?” he said, but it wasn’t really a question. “Did they need to be upgraded too?”

Hannibal didn’t need to answer. He stepped back to allow Will to sweep past into his room. At first he could see nothing but light, soft and seemingly without origin. It filled the space beyond the

doors so that floor, walls, and ceiling were completely obscured from view.

“What’s the music?” Will asked. It had grown louder though it too came from no particular source. “I don’t recognise it.”

Hannibal had his back to him, closing the doors with a soft click. The mist was beginning to clear - Will could make out the dim shape of an elaborate doorframe and a pattern of light coloured wood underfoot.

“Because you’ve never heard it,” Hannibal said. “I’ve been trying to compose something for you but it is unfinished.” He moved deeper into the room; the mist vanished in his wake.

Will followed, absorbing his answer in silence. This room contained the truth of what Hannibal felt for him; it was an intensely private space. He looked around but there was still little to see until Hannibal called his attention to it. Then it blossomed into full living colour: a grand high-ceilinged room, vaulted and domed like a church, filled with flowers in various stages of decay. The scent which filled it, however, was fresh and light - roses on a warm summer’s day. Shrouded objects were arranged across the floor, some huge and looming, others small and fragile, displayed on plinths so all were at eye level. They were memories, Will supposed, moments in time, ones different to the one they’d come to visit.

As they approached the far end of the room, suddenly Will could perceive that the walls were hung with great gilt-framed paintings. He stopped to look at one, and the longer he looked the clearer it and its neighbours became. Then he coughed in surprise; his eyebrows sprang high. They depicted some very private moments indeed.

“You’ve made me a real Venus,” Will said, staring up into his own radiantly flushed face. There were crisp white sheets twisted around his limbs; deep blueish shadows crowded the edges of the painting and crept up over the bed. “Venus crossed with Michaelangelo’s David, painted by Caravaggio.”

Hannibal shook his head, dismissing the notion. “I’ve always thought Botticelli would have captured you perfectly.”

“Well, ” Will said, feeling as if he might laugh. “I stand corrected.”

As he looked, the picture before him became less darkly voluptuous, morphing into something light and springlike. His likeness was fresh-faced and youthful, with carefully depicted dark curls and a frank expression. He considered this vision seriously - this must be how Hannibal saw him. He didn’t hate it, he decided. *In fact*, he thought, *there could even be some truth in it*, and he moved away.

Hannibal led him to a large alcove situated directly opposite the door. “This is where our beginnings are,” he said. “As we travel further inside we penetrate deeper into history. This is the earliest point, the place where I began building this room.”

The alcove was inset into the thickness of the wall and filled with a collection of things which, to Will, made little sense. A lifesize swan nested on a large round dinner plate; beside it a hare was laying eggs in a rough and twiggy bird’s nest. Displayed on a shelf lower down was a book - its cover showed an electricity pylon with huge muscled arms banging two cymbals together. There were less strange objects, too - a postcard of a woodland glade bounded by dense pine forest, a

scrap of plum-coloured velvet, a statuette of a young faun, a blank sheet of notepaper, and a single white rose.

“In my palace I preserve information but also memory,” Hannibal said. “All the sensual aspects of life. I built it so I could live here if I had to.”

He pointed at a photograph in a silver frame; Will followed the movement of his finger and then realised they were standing on the balcony above Hannibal’s office. The memory of their first meeting was playing out below; Will watched himself enter and be seated; he watched Hannibal deliberate then offer to take his coat. When they both settled into conversation, he turned to speak to Hannibal.

But he found Hannibal was watching too, and with an inscrutable look on his face which told Will plenty. Instead of interrupt him, he let the memory continue. It correlated perfectly with his own recollections - nothing was inaccurate or embellished for effect. He studied the Hannibal below, answering questions at his desk, for anything he might have missed the first time but all was just as he remembered. After Will had glanced at the clock and apologised for trespassing on Dr Lecter’s valuable time, after the moment had passed when they should have parted, Will watched himself climb the ladder at Hannibal’s invitation and begin browsing the bookshelves. He caught the secret smile on his own face when he realised he was being watched from the desk below.

“I remember it all so well,” Will said. “The smooth wood of the ladder under my hands, the smell of books, the feel of their covers under my fingers.” He looked at Hannibal, now watching him rather than the scene unfolding below. “But you turned me down,” Will said. “You kissed me and then turned me down. Sometimes I forget that - it feels like you’ve always been in love with me.”

Hannibal moved closer; his hand settled low on Will’s back. “I thought I’d enjoy you more as you were that day, as a memory,” he said. “Obviously, I was very wrong.”

Will angled himself towards him, turning his back on the embracing figures downstairs. He tilted up his mouth and drew Hannibal to him, winding his arms around his neck and holding him there. Their kiss was deep but soft, an echo of the one happening below. There were tears in Will’s eyes by the time it had finished; tears in his eyes and heat in his cheeks. He remembered how shameless he’d been, how determined to make Hannibal his, just for a little while. How well it had worked. He’d chosen Hannibal without knowing anything about him - did he really regret it now?

Will blinked a few times and set his jaw. “How many men were there?” he asked. The vision of Hannibal’s office faded and they were back in the flower-scented room. “The ones that killed Mischa.”

“Six,” Hannibal said. Will’s face was still cupped gently between his hands. “Five I killed myself and one died in prison.”

Will nodded; Hannibal dropped his hands and stepped back.

“Show me the first one you killed,” Will said, “and then the last.”

Hannibal agreed to the command without a word. They left the room; Hannibal closed the doors behind them with tender attentiveness. Once they were secured travel was instantaneous - Will had only a sense of speeding movement and then they were in a different room, with a marble floor and walls formed of huge blocks of white stone. The air was cool and there was music again, this time Bach.

Though the interior of this room felt large, Will had no means of judging its true size. The walls were visible to him, and so was the floor where it met the walls, but the distance to those points from where he stood was impossible to read. When he tried the air in between shimmered as if with strong heat, distorting the space into strange contortions; he could've been standing in a room the size of Hannibal's kitchen or one the size of a football field. And there were no artworks inside - the walls were blank dressed stone, unrelieved by ornament or decoration, and the objects spaced at intervals around the floor were not sculptures. They were bodies, frozen in time like waxworks. Will counted five but the strange unknowable geometry of the room undid much of the meagre reassurance that provided.

Hannibal stepped over a channel in the floor, along which congealing blood still sluggishly trickled, and went to stand beside the nearest figure. It was headless, with a ragged stump of a neck; loose skin hung from it in twisted and torn folds, bloodless and grotesque. The head was placed on a silver platter by the corpse's splayed feet, while the corpse itself was seated against a tree - a rope around its middle held it sagging weight upright.

Will swallowed, hanging back as if physical distance could protect him from the sight. He glanced once at the decapitated head, then took in a sharp breath. Instead of letting his gaze settle on the corpse, he allowed his eyes to follow the trunk of the tree; it soared upwards without any hindrance from the ceiling. The head had had its cheeks sliced neatly off; its teeth grinned widely and white, and its eyes protruded from their sockets, bruised and bloodshot with burst veins.

"This is Dortlich," Hannibal said, as if introducing an old friend. "When I was still studying at l'École de Médecine I had to travel back to Lithuania to attend to a minor legal matter of the family's. While I was there, I went back to view the lodge but found only ruins and bad memories. And, as you can see, I also found Dortlich."

Will listened in silence and, having mastered his stomach, turned his attention back to the body. *No, to Dortlich*, he corrected himself.

He still felt repulsed but also distant, and from this distance sprang curiosity. The display was not what he'd expected. It was dramatic, almost fantastical; he guessed it had been improvised.

"This isn't a cut," he said, looking at the neck. "How did you remove the head? Hanging?"

"I persuaded one of his horses to do it for me," Hannibal said. "He'd distanced himself from his former comrades and had become a well-to-do bureaucrat. I waited for him at his stables - you can see the rope marks there, quite clearly."

Will leaned closer and saw burns just below the stump; the chafe and squeeze of a tightening loop of rope popped into his mind without warning. It must have been a horrifying event.

"He was very useful in locating some of the others," Hannibal said, and smiled. "He sung very well once I got the rope around his neck."

Will stood up, feeling a little sick, but made himself look again at the grinning head. "And his cheeks?" he asked.

"I ate them with mushrooms," Hannibal said. "There were some in the woods nearby."

He spoke in such a normal tone of voice - it wasn't even a boast. Will rubbed his temples, straining to wrap his mind around everything he'd seen and heard. He'd come here to look, to understand,

perhaps even as punishment for himself. *He had to know, had to keep pushing forward--*

"It's all very… inventive." He frowned, considering the scene in front of him and the sentiments which had driven it. "I thought you'd be angrier. It's a punishment but it also feels mocking." He turned to Hannibal. "You went to the lodge," he said. "You went looking for Mischa, didn't you? Did you find her? Did anyone ever find her?"

Hannibal shook his head. "No," he said. "I looked but I assume the only funeral she had was what the forest could provide. I scattered flowers over the pine needles and dirt and I left, never to go back."

Will suppressed a shudder, wondering if she was there somewhere, undiscovered in a shallow grave. Hannibal waited, patient as a monument.

There were four other bodies in the room, lumpen shapes sticky with blood, all details obscured. "Which was the last?" Will said, glancing round at them.

Hannibal moved with precision, stopping at a heavy farmhouse table with carved legs. On it was pinned a man - one limb stretched to each of the four corners with a knife rammed through the hands and feet, so deep that in places the wood had split. His chest and abdomen had been disfigured with ferocious slashes; a handful of newly minted coins glittered from within the folds of his guts.

Will walked round the table, glad that smell was not part of the memory - there was an oily-looking sheen to the exposed organs which suggested some very unpleasant odours. There was much more blood, too; it soaked into the wood and glinted wetly in his wounds. He stopped and tried to think of something to say. His reactions were coming too fast, it was hard to keep up with them. He was less shocked the second time, more focused. Was that right, he wondered, was that normal?

"There's something about this one," Will said. "It doesn't make sense somehow. Like two people had a hand in it?"

Hannibal's expression shifted, slow pleasure eclipsed his gravity. "Very impressive," he said. "If Jack were here you'd never escape the clutches of the FBI. This is Kolnas - allegedly retired, he was running a restaurant here in the United States yet it took me years to discover him, and when I did it was quite by accident. Being close to home, I disguised his murder as retaliation, a message from one gang to another."

"And what a message," Will commented, looking again at the coiled intestines studded with coins.

"The coins are a calling card used by a particular group of Russian mobsters," Hannibal said. "A happy coincidence, since Kolnas was fond of money and surely would've gorged on it if he could. Organised violence tends to be both highly personal and highly impersonal - the victim usually having wronged the perpetrators in some way and then their bodies being used as a warning against further transgressions."

"So you killed him but under the guise of another killer," Will said. He noticed, now, that the slashes across the abdomen were made to look hurried. "Are these just for show?" he asked, indicating the wounds.

"You have very good instincts," Hannibal said. He came to Will's side and, beckoning him closer, slid his fingers into one of the gashes and held it apart. "There, see? The liver has been damaged,

apparently in the frenzied attack."

Will leaned in; the wound was oozing blood but beneath it he could just make out the spongy texture of a ruptured liver.

"Damaged and presumably missing some pieces?" Will said, raising his eyes to Hannibal's. "If anyone looked closely enough they might spot it but you guessed they wouldn't."

Hannibal straightened, eyes sparkling, and wiped his hand clean with a handkerchief. Will blinked; he'd had a glimpse, just a small one, of Hannibal at work. In it he displayed a distinct lack of anger and more than a little glee.

"Only small pieces," Hannibal confided. "He was still alive when I cut them out." He looked critically down at Kolnas's contorted face. "He died thinking his daughter was next. He had taken Mischa's bracelet, you see. I don't know why - it's not valuable - but there it was, on his little daughter's wrist." Hannibal glanced at Will and, seeing the doubt on his face, said reproachfully, "She's alive and well, as far as I know."

Will could've laughed at how ridiculous that was. He pressed his lips together in a tight line, shaking his head. "Of course you didn't," he repeated. "Killing her father in a sadistic mockery of revenge was quite enough." He felt weary; his heart was heavy in his chest, a dead weight like a burden. "I think I've had enough - can we go back?"

Hannibal's face was very close to his; Will blinked. Something bright and fiery swung before his eyes and then he was sitting on the couch again, still tucked into Hannibal's side.

Hannibal smiled. "Anytime you like."

Will blinked some more, rubbing at his face. Night had fallen; everywhere there were shadows and where they touched he saw spilled blood and the gleam of torn flesh. He realised he was panting, trembling. Hannibal's smile was unchanged; it watched him with delight and with wonder.

"Fuck." His mouth felt numb; everything felt numb. Was he cold? He lunged at Hannibal, took him by the shirtfront, and crushed his lips to his.

Hannibal grabbed him with hard and unforgiving hands; they seared him everywhere they touched. *I'm branded*, Will thought, shedding his t-shirt. Branded, wounded, scarred; he writhed in exquisite pain. Will found Hannibal's face, his jaw, his throat; he squeezed and scratched whatever he could reach, biting at his mouth, kissing the lips which devoured others. He was too hot. So was Hannibal, and the heat of his skin burned. Will tore open Hannibal's shirt and pushed his face against his heart beat. He tasted of sweat and blood, honest and raw. Hannibal growled but Will bore down on him, holding him down, demanding and pleading.

"Fuck," he panted again into Hannibal's mouth, breath shivering against his teeth. His thighs wrapped around Hannibal's hips and squeezed. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck me. Now, now, do it now."

*

Darkness was pressing against Will's eyes when he opened them. He lay as still as he could, slithering an arm out of bed to search for his watch. It was just past three, the deepest and most secret part of the night.

The breathing next to him, slow and steady, did not falter. Slowly, and with a faux stumble, Will got up as he might on any other night. As if he were simply going to the bathroom.

Hannibal did not stir. Will hesitated, near enough to make his features out in the dark but beyond arm's reach. Hannibal's face was slack, hazy in sleep. His hair tumbled over his forehead, a few strands lay soft on the pillow. His body curled around the space Will had lain, a space now empty. He always kept Will close to his heart. Always.

A whimper threated to escape Will's lips. Instead of uttering it, he turned and fled.

Down the stairs he went, as quick and silent as possible. His heart pounded in his ears and seemed to reverberate throughout the house; irrationally, he feared it waking Hannibal. His bag was still where he'd dropped it in the foyer. Opening it he saw his phone, his charger, his money, all still inside. He was shivering by then, naked and barefoot on cold tiles; the warmth of the bed all now lost to him. His clean clothes were upstairs, guarded by the sleeping Hannibal, but the ones from earlier were strewn across the floor of the living room. He tiptoed in, ears straining for the creak of the mattress, for soft and stealthy footsteps, and dressed quickly. Just casual pants and a t-shirt but they would do; his hands trembled when he pulled them on, betraying his determination not to think of what had precipitated their removal.

Next he made for the hall, seeking what he hoped was still hanging in the closet. The door opened smoothly; Will caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on its reverse. He was white, lips pale and hair dishevelled. Inside the closet, Hannibal's cologne clung to a row of well-tailored overcoats; its scent familiar, warm, gently persuasive. Will saw his own look of pain in the mirror and disregarded it, reaching instead for the car keys dangling from a hook. From there it was a simple matter to step into the garage. Already he felt safer, less afraid of discovery. Automatically, the garage lights came on overhead, revealing the muscular lines of the Bentley. Will unlocked it, threw his bag into the passenger seat, and got in. The sound of the doors re-locking bolstered him further. The garage controller was in the glove compartment - he took hold of the wheel, adjusted the mirrors, and started the engine.

One, two, three. Will took a deep breath, opened the garage doors, and pulled out into the night.

Chapter End Notes

(I'm trying very hard to keep any notes to a minimum but it is very hard, omg)

The École de Médecine is where Hannibal studied in the books, before he continues his medical career in the US. It no longer exists but instead of picking a contemporary equivalent I've kept it the same. I like the sense of Hannibal being out-of-time and out-of-place and this is just another example.

When Hannibal says "Hypotheticals are of no interest to me" this is taken from *Hannibal* where Barney tells Clarice that "...Dr Lecter has no interest in hypothesis. He doesn't believe in syllogism, or synthesis, or any absolute" after she asks what he thinks Hannibal would do if he was free (man, I wish we could have had some Barney in the show). Among other things, I took this to mean that Hannibal does not invest heavily in one future over another - he sees

equal possibilities and interests in everything. (Until, arguably perhaps, he meets Will…) In this fic, I also wanted it to have a nihilistic flavour as he has come to an unexpected standstill.

The weird stuff in Will's portion of his memory palace I made up according to some common methods of encoding memories in systems like Hannibal's. The swan and dinner plate hold the shapes of the numbers 2 and 0, and the hare laying an egg indicates Easter (apparently this is where the modern Easter Bunny comes from, who knew?) and therefore April (I know it's sometimes in March, shush). I picked 20 April as the date they first met as it's the date the first Quicksilver fic was posted. The book with the electricity pylons with arms banging two cymbals together stands for *Power and Symbol*, which is the made-up book which Will pretended he wanted to borrow so he could see Hannibal again. Similar weird/grotesque imagery is shown in Hannibal's palace in the books, but I also like to think he uses other, more sensory elements where he wants to encode more than just information and facts.

Phew! Finally, if you're enjoying this fic and would like to share with your followers, here is this chapter on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The streets were still empty of life. Will drove along rows of well-spaced sleeping houses, holding his breath in case the sound of the Bentley's passing caused one to open a shade-lidded eye. Mentally he rehearsed all the reasons he might have for driving so late at night - to catch an early flight, perhaps, or he could be in search of an all-night pharmacy after some mild medical crisis had forced him from his bed. He couldn't shake the feeling of being watched; it took only five minutes to leave Hannibal's neighbourhood behind but the relief he experienced at doing so was enormous. It seemed like hours since he'd crept out of bed and run away into the night.

Driving among the sparse city traffic eased his nerves a little - he was no longer alone with Hannibal, no longer alone with his guilt. The sense of pursuit lessened, and then lessened again once he joined the interstate. The lights were brighter there, bathing the road in a chilly artificial noon. Headlights slid by, taillights burned in front. People were everywhere, normal people doing normal things. Each car bore a single driver cocooned in a bubble of darkness, all of them anonymous and heading towards destinations unknown - unknown to each other and maybe even from themselves.

Will belonged to the latter group of drivers. He didn't know where he was going but wasn't overly worried about that; all he wanted was to get as far as he could before Hannibal noticed he'd gone. The clock on the dash told him it was coming up to four. Hannibal usually rose not long after five, though sometimes he slept late, especially when Will was there. Will prayed that today would be one of those times, that Hannibal had not already been alerted to his disappearance. He could even now be sitting up in bed, watching Will's progress via the GPS tracking that must come as standard with his stupidly expensive car. Taking it had been a gamble, but through it Will had gained the twin powers of speed and movement and, conversely, Hannibal had lost them. Even if he knew exactly where Will was, he couldn't follow until the car hire places opened for the day. That would buy him a couple of hours. And a flight would be pointless until the car parked somewhere, and then, if Will wanted more time, if he wanted to disappear more completely, he had the option to ditch it and jump on a Greyhound.

The monotony of the drive began to work on him in increments; his heartbeat settled into the rhythm of the passing lights, urging him on and on without end. Once an hour had sped by he felt safe enough to pull into a drive-thru for coffee and some food. He'd driven past and rejected several rest-stop diners - the idea of getting out of the car and leaving it in a parking lot, even for a few minutes, made him ridiculously anxious. Supposing someone stole it and left him stranded? Or if a passing cop noticed the discrepancy between his wild-eyed demeanour and the luxury car and stopped to question him. He caught himself worrying that he might be recognised, as if he was already a missing person, a fugitive. He paid for his coffee and bag of takeout then drove to the other end of the lot to eat it, picking a space close to the rest rooms and the other cars. It was as close as he dare get to the rest of humanity, afraid he'd catch a glimpse of himself in someone else's eyes and see he'd already lost his place in its throng.

He opened up the bag and started to eat his burger. A stupid thought came to him and wouldn't let go. The smell: it would linger, worm its way into the leather upholstery. Hannibal would smell takeout the second he opened the door. He would hate it. Will had to choke down his mouthful,

unsure whether he was going to laugh or cry. But in the end neither happened; he simply took a deep breath, cracked a window, and went on eating. It tasted surprisingly good. But then he was hungry, having eaten little over the past day and a half, and it was exactly the kind of food he needed; the kind people habitually turn to in a crisis - high-calorie, high-fat, high-salt. A false comfort and all the more satisfying for it. Will ate steadily, feeling a measure of resolve return to him as the clock clicked silently on.

His thoughts turned back to the scene they'd been replaying, over and over, since he'd driven off: the moment of Hannibal waking and finding Will gone. It was incredible that, after everything Will had learned and experienced, it still hurt to think his actions would hurt Hannibal in turn. When he tried to picture that moment his heart tightened and shook, as if trying to tear free from his ribs. As if it wanted to undo what he'd done.

What would Hannibal do? What would he be feeling, thinking? Anger, more than grief? Or the other way around? He'd feel betrayed, certainly. Will felt like he'd committed a betrayal, like he'd lied to Hannibal when he'd told him he understood, when he'd kissed him, when he'd fallen asleep beside him. But Will hadn't lied - that was the problem. It was why he'd had to get out, get away. There was no way to untangle his thoughts with Hannibal there. His agenda was too loud and his presence too tempting. Will just wanted some peace - even the illusion of peace was enough.

What *was* Hannibal going to do? What would happen when they met again? Will had acted without thinking but now, putting the question seriously to himself, he found he didn't believe he'd put himself in danger. Instead he'd rolled the dice on a new future, and he couldn't tell what meaning fate would tie to the result. He wasn't afraid of Hannibal - not like that, at least. Not yet.

He reminded himself that the car, technically, was his. They were married, he hadn't stolen it and whatever happened he would give it back. Hannibal would be unlikely to report it as theft but there was a bigger chance he would report Will's disappearance - it might even look odd if he didn't. Will could hear how he'd speak, the figure he'd present as the anxious, sleepless mature husband. Arrogant enough to involve the police, clever enough to subtly imply that Will was young, flighty, in a fragile state of mind. *My partner vanished in the middle of the night without a word. I don't mind, they can have the car, I'm just worried. I just want to know they're okay.*

But that would be a cold response, Will decided. It was much more likely that Hannibal would wait until he had enough information and then come find Will himself. Will probably had a day or two before he'd have to decide whether he was ready for that to happen.

He finished the burger and left the greasy bag screwed up on the passenger seat. He drained the last of the coffee while casting a critical eye over the car - what next? Plenty of gas, plenty of road. Where should he go? The sky was getting lighter, greyer. He'd only progressed about fifty or sixty miles - it wasn't enough. Hannibal must have woken by now.

Will fished around in his bag for his phone. In his haste to get away he hadn't switched if off and he braced himself for a barrage of missed calls and messages. There were none - his notifications were empty. Was that good? He wasn't sure so he hid the phone away again.

The key was in the ignition, the engine idling, but he still hadn't fixed on a plan. He just needed some quiet, a place to think and be alone. He couldn't go to his mother - she would ask too many questions and, anyway, he couldn't let her become involved. Same with his dad.

A sudden horrible thought crept up on him, then; a suspicion that Hannibal might use her to put pressure on Will. But Will firmly pushed it away - if he could, Hannibal would want to keep this

matter between the two of them. It would suit them both better that way.

He went over his options again as he put the car in drive and rolled smoothly towards the exit. He had a little money put aside so he could head to a motel, maybe a series of motels. That would be the obvious course of action. But then he remembered something - when he'd been looking for the garage controller, he'd thought he'd glimpsed something else in the glove compartment. He opened it up and found he'd been right. Inside, like a star to steer by, were a set of keys.

Will knew immediately what they were. He remembered them well: the keys to the beach house. He pocketed them and drove on into the night.

*

As the skies lightened and the morning progressed, Will kept an eye on his phone. No calls came, no messages; it looked like Hannibal had kept Will's flight to himself. Had he decided to play the worried husband, Bev would have been in touch hours ago; so would his mother. Over a late-morning breakfast at another drive-thru, Will grew increasingly certain that this was how it was going to remain. Their courses of action were starting to narrow; each of their respective choices made the next move easier. Hannibal had prioritised secrecy, keeping their drama meaningfully intimate. He would follow, at a distance, when the time was right.

Knowing the role he was going to play made everything simpler. Emboldened, Will pulled off the interstate near New Brunswick and found a Target. There he bought a couple of t-shirts, a pair of non-descript men's jeans, a few essential toiletries. He was careful not to buy too much at once, afraid of drawing attention to himself. His appearance was dishevelled and perhaps even more out of the ordinary than usual - wearing clothes he could have tumbled out of bed in, driving a car he didn't suit. He did the same again at the next exit, this time buying underwear, sunglasses, toothpaste. He was growing exhausted; the road danced before his eyes. He got more coffee and some doughnuts; he tidied himself up in a restroom, finding his hair wild, his face pale, and his eyes bruised with tiredness. It was six hours since he'd woken, with a lurch of sickening clarity, in Hannibal's bed. He'd been driving for five hours, and for one of those in the wrong direction. There were at least another two ahead of him.

Before he crossed the bridge and made for Long Island, he sent Hannibal a message: *don't follow me.* Another calculated risk, but one he felt more confident of now that the rules of engagement had been set. It wouldn't stop Hannibal from coming but it wasn't intended to - they both knew he wouldn't be put off. What Will hoped was that it would provide Hannibal with an assurance that he could find Will where he expected him to be for a few days yet. Also it would let him know that when Hannibal turned up, Will would be ready for him.

Or, Will thought, as he pulled up in front of the beach house gates, *he could be here already.* A flight to JFK, a hire car - depending on how quickly Hannibal had guessed his destination it was a genuine possibility. He drove slowly past, then turned the car around and came back again, straining for signs of anything unusual. But the neighbourhood was as rich and blank as it had been the first time. It gave away nothing.

He stopped again, drumming his fingers on the wheel, frowning. There was absolutely no way to reassure himself from the roadside - the privacy of the house was absolute. Will reached for the keys and clicked opened the gates. He watched them slide apart and when he drove in to park he kept the car doors locked and the engine running. The gravel drive had been raked since they'd last been here; it was smooth and free of footprints. Was that normal or had Hannibal been here and

covered his tracks? All the shades were down; the house had a shuttered, undisturbed look. Will waited in the car for five, ten, fifteen minutes. He checked his phone - there had been no reply to his message but it had been read.

He swung the door open and got out slowly, limbs aching. He crunched his way across the gravel, examining the windows, the front door, exhibiting himself like bait. But nothing moved; nothing came for him from the shadows.

Satisfied, he sealed the gates behind him and got back in the car. Once it was safely hidden away in the garage, he conducted a search of the house and found it to be empty. He was alone.

The last thing he did before going to sleep was change the alarm code and lock the house down. Then he breathed out for the first time in days and went straight upstairs to bed.

*

Will startled awake a few hours later, huddled on a bare mattress with an unfamiliar blanket pulled across him. For a moment he thought it must be Hannibal again; Hannibal wrapping him up in solicitousness, all soft words and blissful temptation. Then he noticed the strange sparkling quality of the light and sat up. He was at the beach house, alone. The sun was sliding away from the windows, the day slowly dimming. He'd been asleep, dreaming of a drive which had taken him nowhere, the ground moving beneath his wheels like a treadmill. But that wasn't true: it had just been a dream. He was here, far away, watching the ocean shimmer under the sky. He was alone.

Will stretched his tight muscles, then slid off the unmade bed and went into the hall, opening doors and looking into the rooms beyond. All the bedrooms were the same, with beds stripped bare of pillows, sheets and comforters, and a thin layer of dust lay over the bathrooms. The difference to the last time he'd been here was striking: no property minder had been forewarned of his arrival. Somehow, that made him smile. Lacking the little touches which habitually smoothed Hannibal's existence - the pre-stocked larder, the freshly-laundered beds - the place felt more his, ready to be claimed. He could do what he wanted.

First, he made up a room. The one he'd slept in was the master, the same he'd shared with Hannibal. Will collected his bag and turned his back on it, choosing instead a smaller bedroom down the hall. This one had an ocean view too, although less sweeping, but more usefully it also had a window overlooking the drive. The crunch of gravel, however soft, should be audible if he slept with the window open. A spacious built-in closet took up a whole wall - inside he found pillows and a comforter packed away in plastic. The linen closet was at the top of the stairs; once the bed was made, Will checked his phone again. Still no messages: good. Then he went downstairs, thinking of other practicalities.

Food; he needed to fetch groceries. It was growing late - though he really wanted a shower there wouldn't be time before the stores closed. Will could guess what he might find in the larder - a jar of capers, a bag of carnaroli, and probably not much else. Hannibal planned for luxury and good taste, not for simple, convenient eating. It was unlikely that much had been left behind, especially with the house not often being used. Car keys in hand, Will crossed the large living space and made for the larder, tucked away behind the kitchen. He'd better check anyway, before he went shopping.

But on entering the kitchen, he stopped.

The fingers which were holding the car keys tensed, imprinting its hard, jagged edges into his palm. Will took a couple of steps forward and set them down on a nearby shelf.

His mind felt very clean and empty. How shiny and spotless the kitchen was, even under a gentle layer of dust. How hard and unforgiving; how perfect.

It shouldn't look like that, he thought. *It's not fair.*

The knife block was on the counter, barely a couple of feet away. Will picked it up carefully, testing its weight. Hannibal had been sharpening these knives right before Will had interrupted him, full of easy confidence, to tell him he loved him. He remembered exactly how Hannibal had looked, how his hands had been scented with lemon and parsley. He'd been frowning, displeased, about the quality of the cold cuts procured on his behalf. Will had thought it endearing, funny, typical of the man he loved.

It's not fair, he thought again, and hurled the block across the room. It smashed into a cupboard door, cracking its lacquered veneer. Knives clattered across the tile floor with a harsh and terrible sound.

Will remained motionless for a few moments, vision glittering with the disorder reeling across the floor. The knives quaked, flashing with reflected light, slowly rocking themselves to a standstill. He didn't feel anger. What he felt was richer by far; complex; a thrill of unspent power. It began in the soles of his feet and rose upwards, like water filling a glass. He waited with patience for it to swell, until he could contain it no more.

Then he was off, hauling plates and bowls and great china platters out from the cupboards, to smash them on the floor, against each other, against the marble work surfaces. And glasses too; he took a special pleasure in snapping slender wine glass stems and splintering flawless crystal bowls under his boots. It caused him pleasure but he didn't smile - it was serious and he was intent in his work. Panting, he stood looking around at the mess on the floor and realised it wasn't enough. It was all just window-dressing. He took aim at the oven door, kicking out as hard as he could, but of course it was futile - the toughened glass didn't give way. With renewed purpose, Will turned on his heel in search of a toolbox. He soon found one in the garage and brought back with him a steel mallet. The oven door was cracked after the first blow; the second punched a hole in the centre and reduced the rest to a web of glass beads. Next he began on the cupboards, tearing holes in the doors and ripping them off their hinges, destroying shelves and drawers, leaving great gashes in the outer woodwork and in their frames. He even managed to damage the marble work surface; thin branching fractures appeared, running outwards from shallow craters left behind by the mallet.

Flushed with exertion, Will halted to admire his handiwork. A tight, sticky sensation on the hand clutching the mallet made him look down. Both his hands were streaked with comically bright blood. So were his arms and wrists. He lifted them to the light and saw dozens of tiny cuts across his palms, his fingers, his forearms. It didn't matter; he shrugged to himself and wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of a hand. It wasn't as bad as it looked. It didn't hurt. It didn't matter.

His last act was to rescue each expensive Japanese knife from the wreckage and to grind their blades along the edge of the shattered oven door. A quick whack against the mallet to dent and misalign their edges and he was finished. Mallet and knives were dumped into the pile; everything was dust, splinters, chaos. The sink, faucet and refrigerator he left untouched merely for practical reasons; he might fix that later. A sudden, final concern made him inspect the burners for damage, listening hard for the hiss of escaping gas, but all was silent.

He left the car keys where they lay on the shelf and went to order takeout. He wouldn't be cooking anything in that kitchen. No one would, not anymore.

So not to unduly frighten the delivery driver, he went to clean and bandage his cuts. The mirror showed a couple of scratches on his cheek, crusted blood smeared across his forehead, sparkling dust in his hair. He rinsed it all away in the shower, having first prised a sliver of glass out of his finger. Other than that he studiously avoided the sight of his own skin, and when he was dry hid his body away under a baggy pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

The evening he spent outside on the terrace, eating greasy pizza and thinking of nothing. He woke shivering, still on the sun lounger, late into the night and dragged himself inside and up the stairs, hoping for a dreamless sleep.

*

The next day Will felt calmer and more rested. He'd got his wish - his dreams, if he'd had any, were now unreachable. His night's sleep seemed as blank and clear as the unending blue sky he'd opened his eyes to.

It was Monday so he called into the psychology department and made his excuses. He was still sick, he said, and wouldn't be able to come in. It was a flu virus or something like it. He was sorry, he might be off all week. Melinda was beautifully sympathetic, recommending hot lemon and honey, instructing him to get plenty of rest. He messaged Bev too, and said the same. As an afterthought he added that she wasn't to worry and that Hannibal was taking good care of him. He looked at those words for a long time before putting his phone away.

Not a single pang of guilt troubled him about lying, not even when he got out of bed to watch the steady roll of waves onto the shore. What he had was worse than flu, he thought, and much longer lasting.

There was still no reply to his message to Hannibal; no missed calls to disturb him. Nothing at all to dissuade him from the path he'd chosen.

He showered and shaved quickly, then dressed in the most conservative manner possible. His reflection showed something he hadn't seen in a long time - himself in plain and ordinary men's jeans, clean t-shirt and unbuttoned plaid over it; his hair long but unstyled; face clean and free of all makeup. He hadn't appeared so completely masculine in years. He peered closer; the sensation was strange, like that of looking into an alternate universe. He wondered what else would be the same and what different there; if the Will in the mirror would've made the same choices and paid the same price. Was there a universe where Hannibal had left him completely untouched? The thought chilled him and he turned away from it.

The only memorable thing about him was his bandaged hands. Most of the cuts, when he inspected them, were shallow but still red and angry-looking. They were also too numerous - definitely conspicuous, even to casual observers. After some deliberation he decided a few band-aids would draw less notice and left them as they were. Then he packed his bag with the few belongings he'd acquired and got in the car. If he came back to find Hannibal sitting on the doorstep he wanted the option of driving away and not looking back.

In an attempt to avoid running into any of the neighbours, he went to the next town and chose the most humdrum and anonymous grocery store he could find - small-town curiosity was not something he wanted to invoke. The one he settled for had a stream of people coming in and out and only one cashier on duty. He was able to pick up what he wanted, pay, and leave without drawing attention to himself - the cashier had forgotten him by the time he'd walked out. Will shoved the bags into the footwell of the passenger seat and drove off with a sense of

accomplishment. Now he'd be able to survive for a few days without leaving the house or wasting money on takeout. After the gas, clothing, and other essentials he'd bought, he reckoned he had less than $200 left in his checking account. It was enough to last but he needed to be careful - he wanted to go home when he was good and ready, not be forced into it by a lack of funds.

When he arrived back at the house, he was once again cautious. He waited in the driveway for a couple of minutes, keeping the engine running, looking around for signs that someone had been there, for signs that someone might still be there. But impatience flared quickly in him. He was worn out with secretiveness and the need for evasion, and stormed out of the car almost without meaning to. He left the car where it was on the gravel, gathered up his bags, and marched straight indoors. A part of him was poised for confrontation, nearly to the point of welcoming it - something he hadn't realised until he was inside and bereft with disappointment to find that there was no one there at all.

He unpacked the groceries, stepping carefully but unseeingly around the ruined kitchen. The food he'd bought was easy and no-fuss; nearly all of it could be eaten straight from the packet. The processed ham and cheese slices, apples, butter, and milk he put in the undamaged refrigerator. There were no cupboards left to house the other things - a jar of peanut butter, bread, and cereal - so he cleared a small space on a countertop and left them there, alongside a packet of disposable cutlery and a collection of paper plates, bowls, and cups. Then he mooched around, looking for distraction.

Certain places in the house repelled him automatically and without any conscious effect on his part - the master bedroom, the study, the dining table. Instead Will roamed along the edges of the house, where the huge windows met the floor, along stairs and halls and corridors. These places were less personal; there was little contained in them to remind him of their owner. The windows showed only the sky, the terraces, the beach and the sea. The walls along stairs and corridors were painted white and did not lend themselves to display - no pictures hung on them and he was grateful for their silence.

In one of the guest rooms, he made a discovery: a shelf of paperbacks bearing the name A. M. Komeda. Greedily he opened each at the title page, but they bore no inscriptions, no personalised messages, and Will had to conclude that their presence there was an act of flattery. Mrs Komeda must have visited for dinners and drinks, and these books, crisply unread, would have been a polite acknowledgement of her status as an author. But when Will chose one at random and skimmed through a few of its pages, he suspected it was more than that. He scooped up an armful and took them downstairs; out by the covered pool he read and read. There, inside each, he found Hannibal.

He was recognisable in many of her characters. She had a recurring type, a little mysterious with old-world manners; sometimes explicitly European, but sometimes only vague hints betrayed the author's intent. He was often a suspect but only rarely did he turn out to be the killer. Crucially, though, he was also never innocent.

If only she knew, thought Will, dipping apple chunks into the jar of peanut butter. *What a book she'd write then.*

It was easy to just keep reading. One was called *Mask of Silence*, another *Breaking the Veil*. In *Cold Point*, the Hannibal character was at the centre of a custody battle gone awry. In *Hidden Game,* he was the victim of a blackmail plot. They were good, entertaining. Mrs Komeda favoured the whodunnit over the salacious serial murder story, and the murders were banal enough to be realistic and unplanned crimes of passion. She liked her killers to have motive - why someone killed was far

more interesting to her than how they did it. Will found little in them to be distasteful and enjoyed picturing her at work on them; he'd only ever seen her at parties drinking champagne and it was nice to think she had a hidden industrious side. It occurred to him that he could ask her about them when he saw her again, but the thought was too complicated to follow up in any detail. He didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow and neither did he want to know - he would leave that for his friend in the mirror to unravel.

Strangely, chasing Hannibal through her pages wasn't at all painful to him. In fact, he found there was added entertainment value in it - at one point, his character said *I didn't poison you Tobias, I wouldn't do that to the food* and Will laughed aloud with glee. That was why the books were there, he realised. It wasn't to flatter Mrs Komeda, it was a joke Hannibal shared with her. *And now*, Will thought, *it's a joke I share in too. Even more so because I know all of it. I know what Hannibal knows. I know his secrets.*

It occurred to Will that Hannibal probably had laughed aloud at that line too. Will shivered and dropped the book into his lap; he felt as if Hannibal had just stepped out from the house and was standing behind him. He couldn't resist turning around even though he knew there was no one there.

Instead of picking up the book again, he lay back and looked out towards the beach. He hadn't moved for hours, except to go the bathroom or to fetch a sandwich, and the soft salt-scented breeze was at once lulling and enticing. He wanted to walk along the shore but was afraid, not of the idea of Hannibal watching from afar, but of the other people strolling up and down. He vehemently wanted to avoid meeting anyone; even the thought of catching someone's eye made him recoil with loathing. He'd been stripped of his usual protective layer and something was growing back in its place, raw and itchy like new skin. While he waited for it to form, he would stay where he was.

The sound of the ocean recalled Mrs Radcliffe and her mysterious instruction to listen to the ocean. Will had done exactly that but what good had it brought him? He looked at the two rings occupying his finger - the plain gold band and the snake with its tail in its mouth. He hadn't taken either of them off but why was less than clear to him. There was something futile in the gesture, childish perhaps. It wouldn't change anything. He would still be married, still tied to Hannibal. Still in love with him.

For the first time since he'd run away, he let himself think those words and feel their awful truth. It was a bitter experience but there was no use in hiding from it. It was true, and it only grew more so as his anguish enveloped him. His tears came slowly, and then broke into sobs from which he found no comfort. The only comfort possible was that which he would've found in Hannibal's arms, and that knowledge provided no possibility of solace. He was bereft; his body yearned for Hannibal's presence, his heart ached. Every thought contained suffering.

Eventually his misery subsided, and the ragged sound of his breathing mingled with that of the sea. His head hurt; he felt listless, unable to make sense of anything important. So he gave up trying and went upstairs to sleep some more. Rest: that was what he'd come here for. More than anything, he needed rest.

But his dreams returned with a vengeance; big, overblown, technicolour dreams, full of monsters and shadows and terrible, sensual acts. They chased him through his fitful sleep, exhausting him, running him to ground. He woke half in despair, secretly furious at himself as he tried to laugh it off as nothing. Of course his body would betray his reason; of course it would happen in sleep. The past few days had to work through his system somehow. The sheets were twisted around his legs;

he was uncomfortable in his jeans and his t-shirt and his stupid too-big shirt. He flung them all off - *hot, hot, he was too hot* - and got rid of his underwear too. They were the wrong kind; he hadn't minded so much before but now he hated seeing himself in them. But then he was naked and in bed, with whispers of his dreams still writhing through in his mind, so he got up to roam around the silent, empty rooms.

He'd slept for longer than he'd thought. A blue-tinged gloaming had settled, ever-deepening, and it gave the house an underwater feel. He imagined it was a sunken ship, drifting slowly down into cold but welcoming waters. A glimpse of himself as he passed a window heightened the illusion: the pale face and its shocked and wary eyes looked shadowed and secretive, the form of his body seemed softened by the encroaching dark. He imagined himself a deep-sea creature come aboard to explore this strange apparition on its way to the ocean floor. He imagined another creature in the shadows which watched as he walked by.

He'd come to the study, with its door still firmly closed. Will rested his forehead against it, letting his fingers graze the handle. The solid surface pressed up against his bare stomach; it was cold and unresponsive, just a door. He hadn't been able to go inside before but this deep-sea shadow-self could - he opened it and strode through, ready to confront his memories. But when they came he was surprised how pale they were in the underwater twilight. He saw himself ghost-like, skirting the edges of the room and bristling with resentment, fighting the very thing he wanted. In the centre was Hannibal, ghost-like too, infinite in his patience and waiting for his desire to come to him.

And it did: the ghost-Will submitted and took the ring, the ouroboros, and placed it on his finger. In the huge windows opposite, Will saw the shape of something dark in the doorway behind him. Something huge and monstrous. Something that had come to Will: his very own shadow.

Will smiled to himself. A familiar warmth flooded him; the shadow flickered and reappeared just inside the threshold, bigger and bolder than before. Will could hear it breathe, deep and slow and rasping. He sat down in Hannibal's chair and spread his legs wide - the vision of Hannibal sitting there dissipated as soon as he approached. Only the ouroboros remained; the ouroboros, the shadow, and his dreams.

Fragments came back to him: large sharp teeth, hot breath, the press of claws. A binding sensation; the flow of a giant and elegant snake over his skin. Over the roaring of the ocean outside, he heard the sound of cloven feet behind him, felt a clawed hand on his shoulder. Will sighed; with his head tipped back and his eyes closed he stroked himself leisurely, knowing a pair of eyes watched him and hungered.

Nothing happened. His movements weren't disturbed or hurried; no shadow-creature forced itself upon him. Will opened his eyes and saw his reflection dim in the windows opposite. He met its eyes; the action brought with it a thrill of clarity, of honesty. He braced himself against the chair and stroked himself with vigour. The figure in the window did the same, writhing, and with gritted-teeth, in the bruise-coloured light.

It wasn't pleasure he was chasing, it was something else, something other. A confrontation, perhaps emancipation. He came with effort, with bared teeth and a tortured growl.

In the window, the monster knelt at his side; rapt, silent, and obedient.

Will gave a laugh; he wiped his brow with his clean hand, pushing back his hair. The other he offered to the monster. He felt a phantom of heat, the memory of a very human mouth and tongue. Then nothing: he was alone.

Will snorted again, at himself and at the possibilities of imagination. His hand was growing sticky so he wiped it on the chair. Then he curled up, watching the dark movements of the ocean outside, feeling delivered of something.

All he had to do was wait, and Hannibal would come to him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all the lovely comments received so far - I'm enjoying reading them more than you can possibly know <3 <3

If you liked this chapter and want to share with your followers, here's my post on twitter and on our tumblr :)

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dawn was just breaking; the gates were unlocked and the house unalarmed. Hannibal had arrived with a bag full of useful tools but found he didn't need any of them. He simply walked right in.

Will was sitting outside on the terrace, loosely wrapped in a blanket, and looking like he'd slept out there. His hair was windswept and unkempt; the smell of seawater clung to him.

He blinked up owlishly at Hannibal, showing no surprise. "Sorry I took your car," he said. He didn't sound remotely sorry.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow and took a seat on the edge a nearby sun lounger. He glanced meaningfully though the glass doors at the living room and the kitchen beyond.

"Oh yeah," Will said. "And for the kitchen." He shrugged carelessly. The movement of his shoulder dislodged the blanket, revealing a loose blue t-shirt Hannibal hadn't seen before.

"You look terrible," Hannibal said. "I was worried. What are you doing?" It was a banal thing to say but he was unable to stop himself. None of this was quite as he'd expected. Will was somewhere just out of reach; his mood distant, though not unfriendly. It was impossible to tell if he meant to run again.

"I'm listening to the ocean," Will replied. He paused and looked Hannibal over, critically and without mercy. "You look terrible too," he said. "Did you miss me; did you lose sleep? How long have you known I was here?"

"Since you arrived," Hannibal said. "You didn't leave, so I waited."

Will had angled himself to face Hannibal. The low early-morning sun brushed his lips and the tip of nose with gold; his eyes were ocean-dark. "How restrained of you," he said.

Hannibal frowned in displeasure. "Did you expect me to chase you here and force you to come back? Is that what you wanted?"

Will tipped his head back in thought. "No," he said, after a pause. "Didn't think it would stop you though."

"You showed no restraint in the kitchen," Hannibal said. "It looks like a tornado hit it. A tornado with a sledgehammer."

"I was angry," Will said. His tone was simple; as clear and authoritative as a child's.

"So I see," Hannibal said. "Did it make you feel better?"

"It definitely helped," Will said. "If we had to do everything over again, I'd still reach for a sledgehammer." He smiled then, and caught Hannibal's eye.

Hannibal sighed, not bothering to suppress his own smile. “If we did everything over again, then next time I would like to see that.”

“You’re not even mad, are you?” Will asked. He was leaning forward, chin on hand and elbow on knee. His grin was half-hidden behind his fist.

“You didn’t do it to make me mad,” Hannibal said. “You did it because you wanted to. That’s why you left - to show me that you could.”

Will said nothing, watching Hannibal with his clear and penetrating eyes.

“You wanted me to know you could leave at any time,” Hannibal said. He dropped his gaze, jaw tense. Though it was impressive that Will could use his love against him, it was still an annoyance that it worked so well.

“I can leave, yes,” Will said. “Not sure how long I could stay away.”

Hannibal glanced up sharply. Will was growing less flippant and more honest; Hannibal’s hope spiked.

“God, Hannibal - I just wanted some time on my own.” Will pulled the blanket tighter around himself and settled back down on the sun lounger. “How else was I supposed to get it?”

Hannibal didn’t answer. Instead he moved his sun lounger nearer to Will’s and lay back too. If they were going to stay out there indefinitely, under the slow-rising sun and chill blue sky, then he would make an effort to see things the way Will saw them. He would put himself in his place.

“What did you do with your time?” he asked. “Did you sleep out here?”

“Only last night,” Will replied. He caught Hannibal’s eye again. “It seemed like the thing to do.”

Hannibal chuckled to himself. “Urchin,” he accused. “Half-wild creature.”

“That makes two of us, then,” Will said comfortably.

A silence fell over them and Hannibal left it undisturbed. He’d come here looking for Will but wasn’t sure if he’d found him. From where he lay on the sun lounger, he seemed not to be lying by his side, but somewhere out in the ocean, standing waist-deep. His back was to the world and his gaze held by the horizon, as if he might dive in and swim off for good.

If the tables were turned, Hannibal asked himself, *if Will were the pursuer, what would he do?*

Hannibal tried to replicate Will’s talents but couldn’t get beyond his own point of view. The sea was a cold rich blue, the colour of oblivion, still dark except for the faint sparkle of light on its agitated surface. The sky above was growing warmer by degrees; by noon it would be cerulean, full of the brashness of summer, but at that early hour it appeared transparent and tissue-thin, easy to tear. And there was the sound of waves not far distant, butting incessantly against the sand. He watched them wear away at the edges of the earth, dissolving its solidity into their own churning chaos.

“Listening to the ocean,” Hannibal said, half to himself. Like Will.

“I figured it out,” Will confided, rolling his head towards Hannibal. The sun had climbed higher, his eyes were growing lighter and brighter. “What she meant - it’s actually not that difficult.”

He knew he’d caught Hannibal’s attention. Hannibal turned to face him and once again was jolted by how deep his love went. It was burrowing, undermining; he was dissolving in it too. The waves had the power to knock him off his feet.

“She knew something about you, didn’t she?” Will said.

Hannibal looked back out to sea. “In some ways she reminded me of my mother,” he said. “Not her situation but her outlook. I remember my mother as young, elegant, compassionate; she might have resembled Mrs Radcliffe if she’d lived. In our conversations we discussed the past often, the effect it has as it presses on the present. She guessed I was speaking from experience.”

“She found a way of letting the past go and she wanted you to be able to as well,” Will said. He waved at the ocean, impatient but expansive. “It doesn’t stop, it’ll never stop,” he said. “It’s endless, like time itself.”

Hannibal waited for more but none came. He glanced back at Will, who only shrugged.

“That’s all she meant,” said Will. “Just listen; give in. But she’s right - you’ve got the let the ocean show you. It’s like… Trying to describe the sunrise to someone who can’t see colour.”

Hannibal frowned. He’d been expecting something less generic, more profound. It was disappointing. “Like trying to explain love to someone who’s never felt it?”

Will smiled; he always recognised when he was being humoured. “Did you know the sea told me to marry you?” he said, and laughed. “After everything, I probably shouldn’t take any more advice from it. And yet.”

Hannibal smiled back. The air was growing in warmth; yellow light was pooling across the terrace floor, brightening everything it touched. “And yet,” he repeated.

Will sighed, drawing back into the shade of himself. “I don’t have all the answers, Hannibal,” he said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I missed you - I couldn’t help it.”

“And I missed you,” Hannibal said. That was good enough for now. “How about we stick to the present and leave the rest until after breakfast?”

Will gave a small nod. “Are you staying?” he asked. He sat up and glanced around, looking for bags, luggage, evidence of Hannibal’s intentions.

“I left everything in the car,” Hannibal said. “And I left the car a few streets away, in the parking lot by the beach.”

Before Hannibal finished his sentence, Will had got up and gone into the house, trailing the blanket behind him. He’d found the bag Hannibal had left by the entrance and was rifling through it by the time Hannibal reached him.

“Some interesting things in here,” Will said. Tools could be heard rattling around inside. “You’re fully equipped for a spell of breaking and entering. What were you planning to do once you’d got

in?" He turned his big-eyed gaze up to Hannibal, only slightly mocking. Mostly, Hannibal decided, it masked a genuine curiosity.

He smiled back, unruffled. "When it comes to you, I try not to have plans," he said. "You are often entirely beyond me."

Will smirked, quietly pleased with himself. "I think saving you the trouble by leaving the place unlocked was very obliging of me."

He stood up, shedding the blanket, and made for the stairs. "I can't smell very good," he said. "I'm going for a shower." He paused halfway up to look back at Hannibal. "Coming?"

Hannibal hesitated. "Are you sure?"

Will rolled his eyes. "I'm only offering a shower," he said, and carried on up the stairs. "Apart from other, more important, considerations, I'm too tired."

Hannibal followed slowly and at a distance. He found Will in the master bathroom, just stepping out of his underwear. The pile of clothes at his feet were drab and ill-fitting; the underwear a pair of men's boxer briefs.

"A change of direction?" Hannibal asked. Will never wore them, no matter how masculine felt that day.

The shower hissed into life. Will had his hand under the spray, testing the water. He shook his head. "I needed something to wear but didn't want to stand out. So the men's section it had to be."

Hannibal, undressing, considered this: Will had compromised himself to escape from him. It was troubling, in more ways than one.

Will was already in the shower, soaping and scrubbing in business-like fashion. Hannibal joined him in the cubicle - after a night flight, early drive and a few hours patient stake-out, the hot water was welcome. There was plenty of space inside, easily enough to accommodate them both, but the intimacy of the situation was immediately intolerable. It took effort not to reach out and touch the glistening contours of Will's neck as he washed his hair; not to notice that the shampoo he was using was all wrong. It smelled harsh, laced with unpalatable chemicals and synthetic scents. To touch Will would be to reassure himself that he was the same; that he was solid and real; that he was not about to disappear into the ocean. But Hannibal was certain that that was not allowed, not at this early stage of the game.

Will turned and caught Hannibal's eyes; his face changed when he read what was written in them, becoming both harder and softer. His fingers found Hannibal's wrist, then his arm, and moved up across his chest. His touches were light but full of meaning. Hannibal stood frozen, afraid to disturb the spell of his benevolence, but Will moved quickly, slipping his arms around Hannibal's waist to hold him tight. He let his head rest on Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal embraced him back, a perfect mirror of his pose, and closed his eyes. Something shifted inside his chest, a dislodgement which as it eased also caused him pain. He squeezed Will a little tighter; tilted his head to allow the wet strands of Will's hair brush his lips.

Will pulled away with a gentle firmness, and for a long time studied the expression on Hannibal's face.

“Don’t think it’s that easy,” he warned. Then he got out of the shower and grabbed two towels, and held one out to Hannibal. “Breakfast?”

*

Hannibal’s reactions were gratifying to Will: he was wary but interested, and the manner in which he took the towel was almost meek. Will wished to keep him that way for a while longer.

He wouldn’t let Will leave the bathroom without first checking over his cuts. Will protested a little - they were days old and healing, the most minor had nearly faded completely - but there was no harm in giving Hannibal his way, and a little performative submission could even be useful. It took a while; Hannibal gently probed each one, looking for anything buried under the surface, pieces of glass or other debris. When he finished he seemed unsatisfied that there was nothing he could do, that there nothing to dig out of Will.

“You like doing that,” Will said, watching him veil his disappointment. “You liked looking after me when I was in shock and then after you sedated me. Do you like me being dependent on you?”

Hannibal was sitting on the edge of the bath. Now he had no reason to keep hold of it, he relinquished Will’s hand. “Dependence doesn’t interest me,” he said. “I simply like to know you’re well taken care of. You should be: you’re precious. Wherever you go, beauty and colour follow.”

Will rolled the word around in his mind, tasting it, trying to decide what it meant: *precious.* “And the only way for you to know I’m well taken care of is to do it yourself,” he said.

Hannibal nodded. “Not everyone appreciates your special qualities,” he said. “An unforgivable oversight on their part.”

“You also like touching me,” Will said. “In fact, the only thing you like better is talking with me, and only me.”

“Guilty,” Hannibal said, and shrugged. “Could I daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment in the very sight of you? I think so. But do you see through the bars of my plight and ache for me?” His eyes sparkled with challenge, daring Will to deny it. “That’s what I’m here to find out.”

Will lay a hand on his cheek and said, “I’m still wearing your ring, aren’t I? Don’t pretend you haven’t noticed.”

Hannibal smiled and bent his head to Will’s hand, kissing it with a reverence as performed as Will’s submission.

Once it was over, Will ruffled Hannibal’s damp hair, messing up its neatly combed lines. “Let’s go eat,” he said.

Will had long known that breakfast was going to be a sticking point - all he had to offer was some cheap sliced bread and half a box of Cheerios. Hannibal was so appalled he was struck momentarily speechless; after that had passed, a grim countenance descended. He seemed genuinely upset, far more so than he was about the state of the kitchen. Will had to bite his lip and turn away to stop from laughing.

“I had some practical issues to deal with,” Will pointed out, as they shovelled up bits of ruined cabinets and broken glass. “You’re standing in them.”

“The burners are still working,” Hannibal said, as if that was a reasonable response. A devastated kitchen wouldn’t have stopped him from eating well.

“Only because I didn’t want to gas myself,” Will said. “I didn’t leave them so I could use them. I didn’t want to use any of it, *at all*.”

They piled up the biggest chunks of debris by the window for later - bits of cupboard door, supporting struts, a few large pieces of earthenware. The rest they double-bagged ready for the garbage. Will swept up the dusty, grainy residue left behind.

“Tell me what happened,” Hannibal said, as he inspected the cracked worksurface and sprayed down the usable parts. “Why the kitchen?”

Will shoved the broom a little too hard, sending a cloud of glittering dust into the air. “You put a sedative in my water and told me you sometimes eat people. Pardon me for not wanting anything around which reminded me of you in the kitchen.”

Hannibal had stopped what he was doing; he listened to everything Will said with a deliberate solemnity. Then he snorted; it amused him. Everything did, in one way or another.

He went out to fetch a more acceptable breakfast, leaving Will on his own in the house. Hannibal left with careful nonchalance, as if acknowledging the possibility that Will could disappear again might give it the power to come true. Will played along - he liked the uncertainty he’d created. It was better to keep Hannibal guessing; it made him easier to manage.

He was away for longer than Will had anticipated; forty-five minutes had passed before he heard a car pull into the drive. He watched from a window - Hannibal was opening the door of a black Hyundai and taking out bags, so many that he must’ve brought back more than just breakfast. Will greeted him at the door, barefoot and curious. He was rewarded with a cup of takeout coffee, black, very hot and very sweet, just how he liked it.

“Hi honey,” Will said. “Look, I’m still here.”

Hannibal handed him a paper bag, pockmarked with spots of grease. “This is to keep you going while I make breakfast,” he said. “Or in case you can’t bring yourself to eat what I cook.”

It was a pain au raisin, a large one. Will ate it perched on a stool, watching Hannibal unpack. He saw a large loaf of crusty bread, a dozen eggs, some tomatoes, thick yoghurt and a punnet of raspberries.

“No meat,” Will commented. “Very delicate of you, under the circumstances.”

Hannibal smiled dryly down at the eggs he was scrambling. “Among other additives, the bacon had water added.”

Will took another bite of pastry; Hannibal’s distaste for inferior bacon was real but it wasn’t the whole story. “That, and you have to rebuild trust,” he said.

“What are you trying to build?” Hannibal asked. He took the pan off the heat and turned around so he could see Will answer.

“A picture,” Will said. “I’m building a new one of you, all the time.”

Hannibal went back to the eggs, spooning them onto toast. He spoke to Will over his shoulder. “Are you eating with me?” he asked. “Or not?”

Will jumped down from his stool. “Eating,” he said. “Now I come to think of it, I’m extremely hungry.”

*

The eggs were delicious. Probably that was because Will had gone too long without a real meal - they were only scrambled eggs, but Hannibal’s magic touch with food couldn’t be entirely discounted. The eggs were delicious; *he* was delicious. It was unavoidable. Something in him matched up with something in Will - even when fighting they were still a perfect fit.

Hannibal was seated across from him at the dining table; Will gave him a smile. “Thank you for the breakfast,” he said. “It’s really good.”

Hannibal didn’t smile back: he *glowed*. Despite his willingness to act the jilted lover, he was enjoying their reunion as much as Will was.

So far he’d said little, being instead very careful, very gentle around Will. It was a manipulative move, but also authentic - Will was coming to appreciate that the two often couldn’t be separated. Hannibal was still wary and Will was pleased about that; if he wanted Will then he would have to learn the rules.

“What does it taste like?” Will said, breaking another long and golden silence. The sun had long risen; the clarity of the light was astonishing. He fancied he could read Hannibal’s entire history in the lines of his face. “I realise that’s the first thing everyone would want to ask, but really - what’s it like?”

Hannibal dabbed the corner of his mouth with a napkin. Will waited until he shook out its creases and laid it flat on the table.

“If I served it to you, you wouldn’t know the difference,” he said. “Humans are animals like any other. The liver is much like any other kind of liver, the flesh similar to pork, and so on.”

But Will found that answer dissatisfactory; it was both too evasive and too specific, it didn’t get to the heart of what he wanted to know. “What did it feel like?” he asked. “It’s such a grand taboo - I keep trying to imagine it and I can’t.”

“Even with your extraordinary imagination?” Hannibal raised an eyebrow - he obviously didn’t think Will was trying hard enough.

“I can easily imagine *my* experience but not yours,” Will said. “It’s meaningful to you, or you wouldn’t have done it, but everything you showed me in your memory palace was unemotional, without a sense of transgression.” Will thought back to the two dead men, the first and the last: brutalised, cannibalised, displayed. “There’s no sense of escalation, like there is with most fledgling

killers. Only a refinement of purpose and method. You've never shocked yourself with your actions, you just had fun."

Hannibal listened happily to this description of himself, but at the end said, "Fledgling?" His mouth made a disapproving moue.

Will rolled his eyes. "Bad choice of words maybe, but come on, Hannibal. Cut the crap. You and I both know all of that was a beginning, not an ending."

"And you want a different kind of ending." Finished with breakfast, Hannibal lay his knife and fork down neatly, side by side.

Will met his gaze and held it. "The past is one thing," he said. "I think I can let that go, just like Mrs Radcliffe said - but the future is another sort of beast."

"A caged sort?" Hannibal said. There was the faintest trace of sulkiness around his mouth; he didn't like being told what to do. He didn't like limits or limitations.

"I'm not interested in cages," Will said. "I can't change you; I don't even think I want to. But if you want to keep me, I'm telling you how. Once you talked about a shared future - well, that's the only sort of future I'm interested in."

Hannibal's expression was darkening. "You offer me an ultimatum, then."

"I was thinking more of a little honest communication," Will said. "I state my terms, you state yours. Then we can both make choices."

There was a pause; Hannibal's face expressed an unhappy inwardness that Will didn't think he'd seen before.

He stretched out his hands across the table to cover Hannibal's. They were tense, clasped with his knuckles standing out white. Will held them in his palms and squeezed.

"A shared future," he said. "Just like you wanted. Like I wanted; like I *still* want."

Hannibal reacted to his words, lacing his fingers with Will's, his grip tight. "What are you asking for?" he said.

Will took a breath. "Nothing you can't give if you want to," he said. "Firstly, honesty. In everything: if we're to be married then you need to remember it's our life, not yours alone. No half-truths or evasions; no slipping anything in my water when it happens to be convenient for you. No pretending to be something you're not."

Hannibal accepted that quietly. "And?"

"And no more killing," Will said. "Whether for Mischa or not, you've got to let it go. All of it. I can't- I just can't."

A glint of interest kindled sharply in Hannibal's eye. Will interrupted him before he could speak.

"I'm not arguing about why I can't," he said. "If you want, you can have the rest of your life to needle away at my ethics and get me to debate the issue. But that's for later, not for now."

Hannibal remained silent, watching Will very closely; weighing his options.

“Did you tell me the truth about Kolnas?” Will asked. “Was he really the last one?”

“He was the last,” Hannibal said. “But, under the strict auspices of honesty, there was one more. One who had nothing to do with Mischa.”

Will nodded to himself; he’d thought so.

“He insulted my aunt,” Hannibal said. “I’d been living with them for only a few months. She was gracious, patient, understanding - especially with me. He was nothing, a blight of ugliness. Through it, I found my voice.”

“Your voice,” Will said. “Probably your deadliest weapon.” Hannibal smiled at that; Will sighed inwardly. “You must have been young again.”

“I was fourteen,” Hannibal said. “And about your age when I killed Dortlich.”

Will nodded again. All he’d learned was sobering but at least now he could see clearly. If he stayed with Hannibal, he’d have a struggle on his hands; if he didn’t, he would almost certainly kill again. And whichever route Will chose, he’d still love him.

“So what next?” he asked. “It’s not a compulsion, you’ve shown how in control you are. The men who killed Mischa are all dead. Will you do as I ask?”

“Will you ache for me?” Hannibal said. “Will you remember our wedding day with unclouded thoughts, with no regrets?”

“I ached for you since I slipped out of bed and left you sleeping,” Will said. “It’s been… inconvenient. As for the rest, you’ll have to be patient - I’m going to need more than a long weekend to process all this. But, in time, yes. I hope so.”

“Inconvenience is nothing compared to a happy ending,” Hannibal said, and lifted Will’s hands up to his face to be kissed. “I can accept your terms - you have my promise.”

The relief Will felt was so profound it left him blinking, as if confronted by a bright and glaring light. He found his head drooping, his eyes wanting to close; he had an urge to curl up next to Hannibal so he could sleep and sleep and sleep.

“I need a nap,” he said. “Are you coming?”

They’d held themselves apart for so long that coming together again seemed full of obstacles; Will’s breezy self-assurance had finally worn away. An hour ago he would’ve commanded, knowing Hannibal would follow, but things had shifted once again. He wanted their old ease back, he wanted their trust back; he wanted it all to be as it was before. But that couldn’t; they hadn’t yet built what they would become. They had to start afresh.

Will led them upstairs to the room he’d been using. “The master’s not made up,” he said. “I didn’t want to sleep in it.”

Hannibal let that pass without comment. Unusually, he too looked tired; there were shadows beneath his eyes, deeper grooves beside his mouth. He looked, for once, like he’d exerted himself, having done something which hadn’t come naturally and easily. He stretched out fully clothed,

pulling Will's pillow under his head, and briefly shut his eyes. He inhaled its scent; relief flickered across his face.

His eyes slid open again when Will sat down on the bed to tug his jeans off. His gaze swept over Will, his mouth took on an unhappy shape; then he stood and left the room without a word.

Will didn't move from his seat. His mind had slowed to a sluggish pace; he had no energy left to wonder at Hannibal's behaviour. He only knew that something had been agreed and that everything would be okay.

Probably, he reminded himself. Everything would *probably* be okay.

The bedroom door opened again and Hannibal returned, with a carry-on and one of the shopping bags from earlier.

"I brought some of your clothes with me," he said, indicating the carry-on. "But I didn't bring everything." He dropped the shopping bag beside Will.

Will looked inside; it contained underwear - five pairs, joined together with a little plastic tag. Cotton briefs in soft colours, with a little ribbon trim. They were the kind which cost about ten dollars, the kind Will usually wore. Not at all the kind that Hannibal liked to buy for him.

"That's why you were gone so long this morning?" Will said. "You were buying me *underwear?*"

Hannibal frowned. "You should always have choices." He gestured vaguely at Will's clothes, at those still on his body and at the jeans now strewn across the floor. "You couldn't have what you wanted so you had to buy those."

Will was struck by his tone; his regret was palpable. He felt… responsible, distressed. "That really bothers you, doesn't it?" he said.

Hannibal shrugged, a curiously helpless movement. "You should have everything you want."

He made to get back into bed but Will stopped him. He'd thought he was done being surprised over Hannibal but he'd been wrong. It was a deep truth they'd stumbled over, one so deep that Hannibal couldn't find the words to express it properly. It was more reassuring that any of his other pretty ways of declaring his love.

You should have everything you want, he said, and Will believed he meant it. Everything he was capable of, everything Will knew, and this was what it came down to.

Will believed him.

Will leaned in and kissed him, a hand on the nape of his neck and one against his cheek. It was soft and quick; they lingered in it for a fragile moment. Then they climbed into bed and slept.

In it they clung to each other. The sleep which overtook Will was furious, relentless. He shivered too, like he couldn't get warm, burrowing closer and closer to Hannibal as if he contained all the heat Will needed if only he could get near enough. He fell straight into dreams, odd fragmented ones filled with broken and startling images: a little boat in a storm-tossed sea; Hannibal's wet and beating heart lying in the palm of his hand; a snake encircling the moon in a bright ring of light.

Only an hour or so passed before he woke again. Hannibal was asleep still, with his brow uncreased and his breathing slow and steady. His skin was so warm, hidden beneath his crumpled sweater. Will slid his hands underneath and felt the tickle of hairs, growing thicker as he pushed his way up further. He kept his eyes closed and pressed his nose to the hollow of Hannibal's throat - he'd not appreciated before his unique scent, or realised how much he could miss it.

Hannibal opened an eye and directed it questioningly at Will.

"No," Will whispered, sensing the movement. He raised himself up and kissed him blindly, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. "We're asleep - I want to stay asleep a little longer."

Hannibal sighed a wordless agreement; his arms wrapped loosely around Will. Their mouths met languorously, their kisses dissolving into discrete sensations of touch, heat, and breath. Will tumbled sleepily on top of him and pushed aside their clothing by feel alone so that more of them could meet and slide and press together. Hannibal's hand ghosted from his waist to his hip, and then from hip to stomach; when it reached his cock the touch of his fingers was minimal, as if to simply feel the shape of him again. It drew a shiver from Will; he felt it move from him and into Hannibal, an endless circle of action and response, cause and effect.

The effects escalated; their movements became deliberate and then robust. The bump of Hannibal's cock against his own wasn't elegant but it was real and electrifying; Will's senses crackled with it. Like in his dreams, he swam through a series of disconnected impressions: Hannibal's stomach, growing damp with their efforts; the guiding, squeezing, restless hand on his shoulders, his hip, his ass; the flex of a thigh muscle pressed against his. And, beneath everything, the drag of lips under his, moving as if in silent speech.

His climax arrived quickly, prompted by nothing more than a moment of slick gliding contact against Hannibal's stomach. Will came with a stuttering breath, still with his eyes closed. Hannibal followed soon after, giving a long drawn-out sigh; heat pulsed between them, sticky and wet. Will stirred; their eyes met and held but it was too much, too intense and too intimate. He dropped his head to Hannibal's shoulder and tried instead to fall asleep.

He lay there for long minutes, his goal just out of reach. They were too aware of each other for sleep. Every breath Hannibal took he felt in his own lungs, a tidal rhythm which preoccupied him; roaring in and out like waves on an empty beach. Hannibal's arms encircled him, heavy at his waist and back. Inside his embrace it was close, too hot; it felt like home.

Will gave up waiting for sleep and tried to shift and stretch, but Hannibal's grip tightened. Will raised his head. Hannibal lay still, feigning sleep; Will wasn't fooled.

"I'm not going to run off again," Will said, but more kindly than before. "You can let me go to the bathroom."

Hannibal opened his eyes; he studied Will for a moment and only then released him. When Will came back he was fully awake, lying in bed and silently watching for Will.

Will got in beside him and shuffled up close. "I'm sorry I had to hurt you." It was the best sort of apology he could give, and hopefully one Hannibal could understand.

Hannibal blinked slowly while he thought that over. "I'm sorry I had to hurt you too," he said after a minute.

“Well, now we’re really getting somewhere,” Will said. He smiled at Hannibal, who relaxed visibly and began to tease the tangles from Will’s bed-wild hair with his fingers.

“I’m going to sell the house,” Hannibal said, unprompted. “I’m letting it go - all of it.”

Will frowned, caught off-guard. “What, wait - all of it? Attic and all?”

Hannibal nodded. He didn’t say any more.

Will rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “I loved that house,” he said. “It’s got our history all over it.”

“It has,” Hannibal agreed. “But returning back to it now won’t be the homecoming either of us want.”

Will thought about packing up and going back there from this strange adventure; and the inevitable moment when he’d move in with Hannibal for good. He’d loved its dark corners and textures, he’d felt as safe there as an animal in a burrow. But it had been tainted; there was the kitchen where he’d briefly feared for his life, the bed he’d woken up in hazy and alone. And forever stretched out above their heads would be the attic - a heavy burden to carry.

“We’ll get a new one together,” Hannibal said. “I want you to choose it with me. We’ll take what furniture we want from the old house and leave the rest. You can have your own study and dressing room; you can pick out whatever you want.”

“Wow.” Will shut his eyes, his head spinning. He found Hannibal’s hand and cradled it against his chest. “Could we wait awhile before doing all that?” he asked. “I was hoping we could go away, just the two of us. A sort of extended honeymoon.”

Hannibal leaned in closer, a little surprised but pleased. “How extended?”

Will bit his lip. He couldn’t believe he was about to ask for this - it was contrary to everything he’d ever said about Hannibal and his wealth. “A few months, maybe more.”

Hannibal gave him a grin, a brief one. He ducked his head close to Will’s and whispered, “How about a year?”

“Oh god.” Will hid his face and nodded. It sounded tempting, *wonderful*. “I need some time,” he said. “I need to get used to everything. I need to get used to us.”

“Would you like to travel?” Hannibal asked. There was a glow on his face; he was thinking, scheming, already making plans. “There are so many places I’d like to show you.”

“And I’d like to see them,” Will said. “But also new places too - places you haven’t been.”

Hannibal was lying half on top of him, like a big cat. “South America?” he suggested. “I haven’t been there. Buenos Aires would be a must; we could attend the Teatro Colón together.”

Will found himself grinning and nodding along, his enthusiasm building. “Let’s go everywhere.”

“Will you put your studies off for a year?” Hannibal asked. “Professor Crawford probably won’t like it but I imagine he’ll have to lump it.”

“Yes - I can finish up when we get back, when I know what I’m thinking again,” Will said. “Everything looks different from here. It’s like I fell in a river and wound up on the opposite bank. I can’t cross back over but all my old life is still on the other side.”

“So Jack and the FBI will have to wait,” Hannibal said.

Will shook his head firmly. “That as least has been resolved,” he said. “The further I stay away from the FBI, the better.”

Hannibal looked like he wanted to argue. “If you wanted to work for them, a way could be found,” he said. “No one is looking for me. No one knows I exist, except for you.”

“It’s a bad idea,” Will said flatly. “For one thing, you’re not as unseen as you think - Dr Du Maurier noticed enough to up sticks and leave. Mrs Radcliffe figured out you had a secret past, and so did Mrs Komeda, who also wrote you into all of her muder mysteries - you’re even the killer in one of them.” He remembered to leave out Alana from the list - Will was more convinced than ever that she would be in danger if Hannibal learned of her suspicions.

“You read the books?” Hannibal said, delighted. “Entertaining, aren’t they?”

“Very,” Will said. “But my point is the same - anyone who gets close enough figures out something. If they started to compare notes, that could cause problems. We’ve both got to be careful about who we invite into our lives - I’m not about to issue an open invitation to the FBI.”

Perhaps Hannibal had also found himself on the opposite bank - he accepted Will’s arguments without putting up a fight. It seemed that everything really was different in this strange new land.

They rose and spent the rest of the day together, talking of little and thinking of little beyond the present moment. It began to seem as if they’d just arrived for a short getaway - the master bed was made up, Hannibal uncovered the pool and tested the temperature of the water. Will unpacked the carry-on case Hannibal had given him and found all his own clothes inside, the ones he most liked to wear. There was the plum-coloured robe he’d stolen from Hannibal, the checked shirt-dress, his favourite jeans. And in the shopping bags waiting downstairs he discovered the makings of lunch, dinner, and breakfast the next day.

And so it will go on, he thought. *Lunch, dinner, breakfast. Every day for the rest of their lives.*

*

In the evening, when the sky had darkened and the shadows had grown, they spoke again. The pool was dark and unlit, reflecting the stars and the full, swelling moon. Waves curled lazily onto the shore; their sound was soft and lulling.

Hannibal was by his side; they shared the blanket, not for warmth, as the air had not yet grown cool, but simply to be closer to each other.

“Would you have helped me kill him?” Hannibal said. There was a new tone to his question; it lacked a pressuring edge. It was a request, a simple invitation. “Grutas - after everything you’ve seen and heard, would you have given me your help if I’d asked for it?”

While he opened his mind to the question, Will looked at him - his beauty was cold and proud in the moonlight, shadowed with silver and grey. Hannibal wouldn’t need help but he wanted Will’s.

He would want to share killing Grutas with Will, to show him, like he wanted to show him Paris, Florence, Sicily, and now Buenos Aires. Hannibal would take him to the moon if he could, and give him a piece of its brilliance in a box of silvered ivory to take home afterwards.

Will swallowed; tears pricked his eyes. His beautiful monster: how Will loved him.

“If you’d asked?” he said. “Yes. I’d help you.”

The words sat between them like a vow, witnessed only by the full moon. Hannibal softened against him; Will cradled his warmth closer and together they listened to the sound of the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Almost there! The final chapter is an epilogue, in case you were wondering :)

If you enjoyed reading and want to share with your followers, here's this chapter on my twitter and here it is on our tumblr :)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> Here we are - the last chapter! If you've made this far, thank you very much for sticking with me (and Will) - we won't forget you for it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sea was a perfect mirror for the sky above. The wind pushed rough fingers through Will's hair as the sheer cliffs, nodding with bright flowers, pressed in at their side. Beneath the car, the road wound precipitous. Hannibal eyes were masked with sunglasses, relaxed and carefree; in between gear changes, his hand settled warmly onto Will's thigh.

Will had learned he liked driving stick, especially in such a lovely little car. It was enjoyably physical, connecting him directly to the engine and to the road smoothly rolling under his wheels. The car itself had appeared before the end of their stay in Florence - a red vintage Alfa Romeo Duetto, exactly as Will had once fantasised about. Hannibal had been evasive about its origins, and about to whom it should be returned and when, which led Will to think he'd bought it outright. They were in no hurry to leave Italy - during Florence they'd taken a few days in Milan, and later had come stops in Rome and Naples - so Will was content to consider it his own for the duration of their wanderings across the continent. Their trip had begun with an extended stay in Paris; next would be Sicily and the Chapel at Palermo. When they left Italy it could be for Greece, or to cross the water to Tunis, or maybe for another part of the world entirely.

All that day Will felt sublimely happy, as happy as he'd been for several weeks now. There was an immediacy and liveliness in the air - an invisible barrier seemed to have been broken and anything was now possible. It was pure fantasy, he knew, but for a week, or a month, or even a year at a time, this life of luxury was allowable - perhaps even desirable. Piece by gradual piece he'd softened to it. Not only did it seem earned, hard-won like his happiness, but it provided security too. Hannibal had set Will up with his own accounts and his own money because, he as he often said, he wanted Will to have choices. And Will had accepted this because he saw the sense in it - now, with everything out in the open, they could face each other as perfect equals.

Often, Will wondered if he deserved to be so happy. Sometimes he thought too of the happiness he gave to Hannibal and considered the morality of that, for not even he could argue that Hannibal deserved it. But none of these thoughts troubled him unduly. Hannibal had no time for moral arithmetic or divine justice, and hadn't Will willingly made himself at home within his sphere of influence? Inside, it was as if the laws of the universe were subtly changed. Hannibal exerted his own gravitational pull and warped the orbits of other, larger things - things such as ethics, justice, and the solemnity of the law. Will was able to admit to himself that he'd been captured by this force, but also he knew that he exerted an equal pull of his own. Balance, of a kind, had been achieved, and he meant to hold on to it.

The car passed beneath the outcrop of rock which their hotel was built upon and followed the road on into the little fishing town beyond. At a crossroads Will turned up a switchback, taking them back along the cliffs, even higher than before. Here and there the road was shaded with the piney

greenness of trees; yellow and white painted houses clung barnacle-like to the cliff's fractured face. Soon, a smooth high wall the colour of cinnamon rose up alongside the road; Will slowed the car and, on reaching an arched opening studded with crumbling bricks, turned inside its enclosure.

The courtyard beyond was small and picturesque; tumbled with flowers, dappled with light and music from the fountain in its centre. Will parked the car under the shade of an umbrella pine and paused to comb out some of the tangles which the wind had put in his hair. Hannibal slipped on his Panama and set about raising the car's roof to keep out stray pine needles. Then they crossed the cobbled courtyard together.

It was dark and cool inside the hotel after the bright sun. The glow of the terraced gardens could be seen through the open double doors at the other end of the lobby. Through them came the echoed murmur of people refreshing themselves with wine, conversation, and impressive views across the bay.

"Shall we have a drink before we go up?" Hannibal said.

He took Will's arm; the brightness of the garden began to pull them in. But the concierge had noticed their arrival and had caught Will's eye.

"Signora Graham?" he said. "A package has come for you. Will you take it now or should I send it to your room?"

"A package?" Will hadn't been expecting anything. A quick glance at Hannibal proved he wasn't the culprit. "I'll take it now - thank you, Pietro."

Pietro handed him a slim FedEx envelope - the shipping label showed it had come from a print publisher in D.C. Will opened it once they were seated at a table outside, in the full splendour of the afternoon sun, while Hannibal spoke to the waiter about drinks and the evening menu. Out slid the year's sixth issue of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*; included was a slip of paper which read '*in appreciation of your invaluable contribution - it wouldn't have been possible without you*'. There was no name attached and no return address.

Will turned to the journal's contents page and found what he expected - listed on page 437 was 'From moral insanity to *The Mask of Sanity*: a cultural perspective on our fascination with psychopathy', an article authored by Dr Bedelia Du Maurier. When the waiter left, he held it out mutely to Hannibal.

Hannibal broke out in a grin. He took the journal and the slip of paper from Will and scanned them, still smiling. "She wants to disappear but also she can't bear to be left out of the conversation," he said, shaking his head. "Bedelia will get herself into trouble one day."

Will put his chin on his hand and kept his sigh to himself. As much as he'd respected Dr Du Maurier, her superiority of manner seemed stronger with hindsight and he didn't particularly enjoy it. Especially when Hannibal found it amusing.

"Still," Hannibal said, "it's nice to see the fruits of your labours. And you were credited in one of the footnotes."

He slid the journal back across the table to Will. Will returned it to the envelope and stashed it out of sight on the empty chair beside his purse.

“Was she right to leave like she did?” Will asked. “Could you have let her withdraw in peace?”

“Doesn’t the answer to that fall under the promise I made you?” Hannibal said. His sudden glance was sharp, his manner a touch performative. His pride wasn’t wounded, or even pricked - he was merely demonstrating how attentive he was to Will’s wishes.

Will returned his look frankly. “I don’t doubt your promise,” he said. “But in a case like this I suspect there are plenty of other possible responses which are not currently prohibited to you.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal said cautiously. “Bedelia and I were very careful to retain a balance between the said and the unsaid but it was never going to last forever. She picked her moment to tip the scales and ran away before they could collapse on her.”

“So you expected it?” Will asked. “Did you expect her to use me as her tool?”

“I expected something to come of her seeking you out,” Hannibal said. He leaned back in his chair, adjusting his cuffs. “But I think you’re looking at this with the wrong perspective. I’m not the target of this communication - your reaction will interest her more than mine. She may very well be wondering what *you* might do if she pokes at you once too often.”

The waiter was approaching along the paved path with a tray, weaving between tables, lemon trees and fragrant potted plants. They paused to thank him as the table was set with a glass of straw-coloured wine and some fresh, cloudy lemonade. A bowl of olives completed the trio. Will sipped the lemonade and watched Hannibal enact his role of rich tourist. He tasted his wine; he complimented the waiter for suggesting it; he tipped elegantly, carelessly, generously. He was dressed in exquisite style, his suit pale and form-fitting; the brim of his hat set at the perfect slant across his brow. Yet what was underneath was right there, plain to anyone who wanted to see it. He was both languorous and alert, a lion at play in the sun.

It had been in Paris that Will had started to understand something, when Hannibal had shown him his boarding school, and the apartment he’d shared with his aunt, and his old rooms at l’École de Médecine. But it hadn’t been until Florence, city of Dante and the Medici - and again in Milan, walking through the Castello Sforzesco and listening to Hannibal talk of his mother’s great lineage - that Will had begun to consider how, in another age, Hannibal might have grown differently and more freely. One where nobility mean the slaying of enemies and bloody dynastic struggles; plots and poison, torture and triumph; and where it also meant artistic patronage of the highest kind, and the hoarding and displaying of beauty. There was a chance that a man such as Hannibal would have made more sense in another, more honest, era. Arguably, thought Will, he was out of step with time - simply an animal out of context.

“Knowing who I’ve hitched my cart to she might be wiser to stop wondering and keep her distance,” Will said, once the waiter had left them again.

Hannibal’s answering smile was indulgent and full of pride. He said nothing; there was simply no need.

“You still want to go ahead with tomorrow?” Will asked. “We’ve got plenty more opportunities - we don’t have to do it here.”

Hannibal’s wine glass was pinched between his fingers. He looked away in an attitude of thought and re-crossed his legs. They were high up - the horizon was a hazy blue line where sky and sea

merged. “The Tyrrhenian Sea is as good a place as any,” he said. “All the oceans of the world are connected.”

“If you’re sure,” Will said. “The weather looks promising - we need good conditions.”

Hannibal turned back to Will, a soft smile on his lips. “It will be fine,” he said. “*You* will be fine. Relax.”

“I keep telling myself that,” Will said. “But the harder I try, the less it works.”

Hannibal laughed and inevitably Will smiled back at him. They finished their drinks in cosy silence and then stood, ready for the privacy of their suite. Before they went back inside they stood together for a moment at the wall edging the terrace; below them the gardens were stepped in narrow, terraced strips, and below that was the road and then the bare face of the cliff, plunging straight down into deep, rich waters. Waves battered its rocky base; all around them was sunlight and beauty. They turned away from horizon together and walked in step back through the lobby.

“You go up,” Will said, once they reached the stairs. “I want to double-check with Pietro about the arrangements for tomorrow. Just for extra peace of mind.”

“You mean triple-check,” Hannibal said. “But if it makes you feel more at ease, then by all means…” He smiled gallantly and departed; Will stayed to listen to his footsteps, growing fainter the higher he climbed.

Pietro was in his tiny office beside the reception desk, perched on the very edge of his chair and talking rapidly into his phone. All the while his hands were constantly occupied - hunting through drawers, making notes on a series of pages of a notebook, typing at a keyboard. Will waited until he’d finished before approaching his door.

“Apologies, Signora, I hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” Pietro said. “How can I help you?”

His gallantry almost rivalled Hannibal’s. After stays in several luxury hotels, Will had learned two things - that if you had enough money no one was shocked by your nonconforming gender, and that if you appeared on your husband’s arm in a bathing costume enough times the staff would unanimously settle on feminine pronouns. Will was actually rather pleased about it, though it had taken some time to get used to.

He took an ordinary brown envelope from his purse, closely followed by a twenty euro note, and handed them both to Pietro.

“Would you be able to mail this for me?” he asked. “Please use that to cover the cost - the rest is for your valuable time.” Will held Pietro’s eyes, keeping his expression mild. “I’d like it if it didn’t appear in our bill, you see.”

Pietro’s understanding was immediate and extremely professional. His eyes, often sharp, assumed the same veil of mildness. He bowed. “Of course, Signora, it will be done today. And is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, that will be more than enough. Thank you, Pietro.” Will gave a nod of thanks, then calmly left for their suite and for Hannibal.

*

"Dear Alana," the letter inside the envelope read. "*I hope you're not too shocked to hear from me. We parted rather suddenly and, now that some time has passed, I felt it was right to lay your mind at rest on a few points which may have been troubling you."*

Firstly, I should tell you where I am - or rather, where we *are, which is on honeymoon in Italy. We started in Paris and we plan to visit, among other places, Marrakesh, Istanbul, Kyoto, Cape Town, and Buenos Aires. We won't be returning home until next spring or summer, so until then you can buy your meat wherever you like without fear of running into us."*

You should also know that this letter comes from me alone and that no one else knows I am sending it. Nor will they, if you can heed what I write next."

Which is this (and I'm afraid that although this will settle some questions you've long had, it won't help you sleep any easier): you were right. But not about me - I don't need saving. I've thought long and hard about my situation, just as you suggested I should, and I've concluded that this is the best possible outcome for everybody. And I do mean everybody - *I am happy, and should you feel an urge to worry about me I want you to understand what a waste of energy it would be. There is nothing I need be afraid of. I am loved, extravagantly, and I know now that I'm equal to that love."*

I am grateful to you for confiding in me, though, which you may be surprised to learn. And I hope that doing so has purged you of any guilt you might have harboured for keeping your thoughts to yourself for so many years. If you find that it hasn't - if you find yourself tempted again, I urge you to reconsider. I have everything in hand here and I would hate to have to betray your confidence - the consequences of that might be very unpleasant indeed."

Lastly, I am only sorry that we couldn't have become better friends. As a parting gift I will offer some advice: do as you once did, Alana. Close your eyes and walk on. There is so much good you could do in the world but I am not destined to be one of your good deeds."

Affectionately yours, Will"

*

There had only been a handful of weeks between Will and Hannibal returning home from the beach house and then leaving again for Paris. In that time, Will had officially deferred his final year of study - much to the surprise of Professor Crawford - and Hannibal had organised an intimate second wedding to which friends and family only had been invited. It was held at Hannibal's home - a short ceremony in the garden among a profusion of artistically-styled country flowers, followed by drinks and dinner. Though Will didn't love the house as he had done, the feelings it roused in him weren't unpleasant. Something important had happened in it; a transformation had occurred. Looking at the house now was like looking into the past - Will saw memories there, not a future, and was reassured to know that Hannibal agreed. After their long honeymoon abroad, the house would be packed up and most of its contents dispersed, and they would both choose somewhere new to live.

Much of the horror and confusion of those few short days of late summer had been diffused. The attic still loomed large in Will's mind, shuttered up above their heads, but it seemed a sad place now; just a well-tended grave. At the wedding dinner an empty place was set and they told the guests it was a Lithuanian custom for absent friends. Everyone agreed it was a lovely idea and began eating without a second thought.

Will's mother stayed with them for a couple of days prior, and though prone to general cynicisms about marriage, she kept surprising him with tight breathless hugs at odd moments of the day. Hannibal narrowly escaped the same treatment - they hadn't quite built up that sort of relationship and probably never would, but she liked to engage him in antagonistic conversations for fun, as if trying to find fault with him and then being pleased that she hadn't yet managed it.

Before the wedding, she gave Will a card reading. Ordinarily he would have resisted but he felt he owed her for his ongoing deceit. It was full of the usual platitudes about keeping true to his heart and warnings to avoid jealousies and distractions, but there was one strange moment which Will often thought of in the years to come. The ace of spades appeared in the centre of the spread; he watched her eyes flick from card to card, but always returning to the ace.

Eventually, she lay her finger on it and declared: "This is Hannibal."

Will waited nervously for her next pronouncement. He had no fears that the cards could tell her anything meaningful about Hannibal, but her intuition was a rival for his own - what he could see, she also had the potential to see. For her own sake, he needed to make sure that that never happened.

She tapped the card again. "This represents Hannibal for you. Now I understand." Then she took hold of Will's left hand and held it up to him, pointing out the ouroboros on his finger. "Hannibal knows it too," she said. "Well, well, well. I knew I liked him."

At Will's growing confusion, she continued. "He's your shadow," she said. "And you are his. You know Jung, don't you? He's your opposite, your other side. And this ring - it symbolises an endless pursuit, a pursuit which leads towards wholeness. That's what both of you are doing with each other - you could even say it's why you're with each other."

Will was left speechless, uncomfortably unsettled. Her words had a resonance which went far beyond that of which she knew - his skin prickled to think that she could intuit so much.

"I get it," she said. She nodded to herself and, sighing, patted Will's arm. "Now I get why you married him. There was never any other kind of ending possible - not a good one, anyway."

His dad had arrived the evening before the wedding, armed with the suit he wore to funerals and a trunk full of home-smoked fish. He'd first met Hannibal three weeks before, a special trip Will had steeled himself to so they could invite him to the wedding in person. It had been fairly painless, if awkward at times; his dad had rather bemusedly looked Hannibal up and down before offering him a handshake of welcome. Hannibal had wisely kept his powers of charm in check and the hatchet had been buried over a glass of whisky (Will had longed for a nice fat joint but had had to make do). Their conversation had stuck to the subjects of cooking, Will's childhood, and Hannibal's career, and, rightly or wrongly, his dad had been left with the impression that Will had found a nice, solid guy to settle down with. Will tried not to feel any guilt over this - it might be a deception but no one had actively lied. In most ways, Hannibal was exactly what his dad had seen - a loving husband who was willing to make sacrifices to be with Will.

At the wedding there were no official roles for any of the guests, not even for Will's parents, but Bev hadn't been easily refused and attended as Will's self-styled 'best woman'. Despite any misgivings that she still might have had - she was utterly silent on the subject and remained that way - she threw herself into helping make the arrangements. Even Hannibal was surprised, not least because he didn't require any help, but he seemed pleased at her enthusiasm. Will watched them work together with growing sadness - he'd recently become aware that, at some point, he would

have to leave her behind. Bev was simply too clever and too inquisitive. Out of everyone in his life, she was the one most likely to notice something in Hannibal and then understand its significance. He told himself that the distance between them would probably happen naturally - her growing career would eat up her time, she might have to move away to another city. They would slowly drift apart and Will had to let it happen, though he knew he'd always love her.

The wedding itself was surprisingly enjoyable. This time there was no attack of nerves to bother Will, and nor did the presence of the guests worry him. They repeated the promises they'd made only a few weeks ago and exchanged the same rings; and afterwards Will had fun disseminating the news that Hannibal was going to sell his house. Hannibal had invited a tiny handful of his friends from various arts committees and charities - Mrs Komeda among them - and their reactions to the news were hilarious to Will. To them it was unthinkable that Hannibal should move - he'd held so many successful parties, had lived there for so long - and they were desperate to know more about their plans, particularly Will's part in them. Most of them had politely tolerated him as an eccentricity of Hannibal's, but marriage and now this announcement were working on their minds. Will was outside of their understanding; he resisted their efforts to fix him to a role. He wasn't a wife or a young lover and neither was he one of their own number. So what was he? *Well might you wonder,* Will thought to himself. *But I'll be surprised if any one of you ever stumbles over the answer.*

Out of all of them, only Mrs Komeda was close to understanding. "You found out his secret, didn't you?" she said, when she caught him alone on the stairs.

Will smiled slowly at her, his answer ready. "Would I have married him if I hadn't?" he said.

She laughed delightedly. "No longer the ingénue," she commented, pleased at discovering the change in Will. She had no real interest in finding out Hannibal's secrets, Will knew. She liked mystery far better than the truth, and he'd just managed to double it for her.

So, Will offered her his arm and took her to meet his mother. He left them both soon after, with a spread of cards and a love of mystery between them.

*

Pietro's arrangements turned out to be impeccable. Standing by the boat's moorings in the early morning sun, Will found it hard to remember why he'd felt so nervous. The water was sparkling, shaded from deep turquoise to lapis blue; the breeze was moderate and the air smelt like freedom. Hannibal was climbing aboard, a broad grin on his face.

"'Senza Paura'," he said, pointing out the boat's name. "'Without fear'. Are you without fear, Will?"

"You can cut that out right now," Will said. From the jetty he handed Hannibal the picnic hamper the hotel had provided, followed by their own bags. "No one should get on a boat without a measure of fear - the ocean is not for the fearless."

Hannibal was still grinning. "Understood, Captain," he said.

"Though," Will said, after he'd untied the boat and jumped onto the deck, "it's hard to feel any fear this morning. It's going to be a good day, I think."

The boat was beautiful - a small, traditional Bermuda-rig with an outboard, just perfect for a day exploring the cliffs and coastline. Waiting by her side that morning had been a man from the hire company who had shown them around. At first he'd handed the charts and the keys to Hannibal but was soon made to understand his mistake. A smattering of recent lessons had boosted Will's confidence and gained him enough experience to earn a permit for a day's sailing; it was he who would be skipper for the day.

Will steered them out from the harbour under-engine. Hannibal checked the contents of the hamper and stowed it safely away, then settled down to enjoy the trip. He was capable of assisting when Will asked him to but until then he would keep out of the way and watch. Sailing was Will's passion, not Hannibal's. The feeling in his ribs when the sails first caught the wind was unlike anything else; it was obvious it didn't affect Hannibal like it did Will.

They stuck close to the coast, in full view of the soaring cliffs and mountains of the Amalfi, amidst astonishingly clear waters. After about an hour, they lowered the sails together and anchored. From out at sea the great ravines and crevasses between the mountains were striking; each little town along the coast nestled within them, rising and clinging up the mountain sides wherever possible. The water hugging the cliffs looked emerald green from their vantage point, deepening to a dark and glacial blue around the boat.

Hannibal opened the hamper and pulled out a thermos of coffee and a couple of sweet, ricotta-filled pastries. Will smiled - Pietro knew he was fond of them.

"How would you like to sail us across the world some day?" Hannibal asked.

Will's surprise was so great he nearly choked on his coffee. "Are you serious?" he said. "I didn't think you liked sailing all that much."

Hannibal shrugged. "I like seeing you like this," he said. "You're at home here. Water is your element."

"It would be hard work," Will said. "A lot of hard work. We'd have to do it together."

Hannibal shrugged again. "Then I will learn. We both will."

Will sat quietly for a moment, watching the waves lapping up against the hull beneath his dangling feet. Hannibal probably was serious about his offer but Will still couldn't see that far ahead. There were months of travel before them, and then the challenges of returning home and fitting back into their old lives. Lots of change, lots of adjustment; lots of questions to be answered. They needed to complete that journey before planning another one.

"I've been thinking about the house," Will said. "The one we're going to live in when we get back. I want one suitable for a dog."

It was Hannibal's turn to be surprised. "A dog?" He raised a doubtful eyebrow; a corner of his mouth was turned down.

"I've always wanted a dog," Will said. "Dad couldn't have one because he was away so much and Mom's allergic. I even thought about getting one with Bev but I knew it wouldn't be fair - I wasn't settled enough, my future could've lain anywhere. I guess I put it out of my mind until now."

Hannibal waited a little before replying. "But now you are settled."

“That’s right,” Will said. “Settled with you, anyway. Maybe not settled in time and space”

That answer was enough to leave Hannibal content. He stretched out on the deck, coffee in hand; Will could almost see him working out the necessary compromises. He didn’t know how Hannibal stood with animals; it would be something else to observe while they travelled.

After the coffee had got to work, they hoisted the sails again and Will enjoyed another bout of sailing. Hannibal, though, grew more and more silent. Will gave him space, aware of what was coming. And there was work to be done anyway - there was an onshore wind and to move out into deeper waters they had to beat constantly windward. Will put himself through his paces, tacking more often than was strictly necessary, and was pleased with his own performance. He left Hannibal alone to man the helm - though he was attentive to all Will’s instructions, there was something distant in his gaze.

Once Will had had his fill and he’d set a new course to sail gently downwind, it was time for lunch. The wind had grown a touch stiffer and dropping the sails took more effort. They sheltered from the breeze in the cockpit, amidst the rattle of lines caught in the wind. Hannibal brought out the hamper and unpacked it - the food inside was simple and easy to eat, but of the highest quality. Prosciutto and salami, grissini and focaccia, pecorino and mozzarella. There was wine, a half-bottle of Chianti, and sliced vegetables and fruit. Will was starving after his exertion and he ate quickly, noting Hannibal’s silence. He seemed relaxed but there was tension in his jaw, his mouth strained.

“You’re quite sure you want to do this?” Will said. He crept closer and laid a hand on Hannibal’s back. The tension was there too, along his spine. “You could keep it. You don’t need to let go of everything.”

Hannibal shook his head; his mouth tightened. “Everything which lives has an ending,” he said. “Even in the mind. It’s time.”

Will nodded, unseen by Hannibal. His eyes were fixed to the canvas bag he’d brought, stowed underneath one of the benches.

“Is this a good spot?” Will asked. “I can take us somewhere else, maybe one of those little bays?”

But Hannibal had already hauled out the bag. From it he brought a sheaf of fresh flowers and a little wooden jewellery box.

Will folded himself up on the bench and waited quietly. He’d expected some words, even a speech, but there was little ceremony. Hannibal took Mischa’s bracelet out from the box and held it briefly in the palm of his hand; then he reached his hand out over the side and slipped it noiselessly into the water.

They watched it sink together, the silver of the bracelet at first dappled with light, then growing duller and darker as it disappeared from sight. It was over in a flash. Hannibal didn’t move so Will crouched beside him with the flowers and confettied the water with torn petals and flower heads. After a small pause, Hannibal joined him and did the same.

There came a long silence filled only by the sound of water against the boat and the wind slack in the rigging. The petals and flowers dispersed, slowly, with the action of the waves. Will imagined the ripples from the falling bracelet widening, spreading, until they reached all four corners of the globe. Did it mark an end or a beginning? That moment could have laid the memory of Mischa to rest but there was a chance it would only gain in depth and power instead.

Will glanced at Hannibal. “What will the ocean say to you next time you listen?”

Hannibal leaned back from the railing and took his seat in the cockpit again. “It has no messages for me,” he said. “I can’t read it like you do, or Mrs Radcliffe. To me the ocean means only oblivion - but Mischa can rest safely there, far from God’s grasping reach.”

Will reached for his hand and squeezed it. “The ocean can’t be controlled,” he said. “It can’t be acted upon - you don’t like that.”

“Much like time,” Hannibal said. “That was the question we discussed, Mrs Radcliffe and I. I told her sometimes I dropped a teacup on the floor to see if the pieces would gather themselves together again - I always hoped that they would. She was interested in the possibility - she wanted things in her past to reverse themselves too.”

“But she took matters into her own hands,” Will said. “And she advised you to, as well.”

Hannibal looked down at their hands, rearranging their grip so their fingers interlocked. “You can’t be controlled either,” he said. “You’re liquid and changeable - it makes you powerful. I think I have you then you slip through my fingers again.”

Will shook his head. “I’m not slipping anywhere,” he said. “I’m here to stay.”

“But I’ve come to accept it,” Hannibal said. “I am dissolved in you. I can’t stop it; I can only give in.”

Will frowned while he parsed that, then smiled to himself. “Love on a geological scale,” he said, and Hannibal sighed against him. Their cheeks were pressed together; if they turned their heads their lips would meet.

“My mother did a reading the night before the wedding,” Will said. “She said I’m your shadow and you are mine and that we are locked into an endless pursuit. Apparently this is our only possible happy ending.”

“The cards said all that?” Hannibal asked. His mouth was wry, amused. He was visibly pleased at the idea.

“When she said it I really understood,” Will said. “Nobody will ever love me, not like you do. Now that I’ve known you, I can’t go back. Things will never be the same again.”

“Time doesn’t reverse,” Hannibal said. “No matter how much we might want it to.”

Will leaned closer and whispered, “But I don’t want it to.”

Hannibal weight settled more heavily against him. His eyes closed. “Neither do I,” he said.

Around them the boat rocked gently on each shallow swell; with their backs to the mountains, the ocean before them seemed endless.

Chapter End Notes

The empty place at the wedding dinner is indeed a Lithuanian custom, but for Kūčios (the traditional meal on Christmas Eve) rather than for weddings. I've written another fic where Hannibal bends this practice to express his grief over Mischa and I thought it fitted very well into this one - you can read it here.

Hannibal's slightly odd speech about God as he releases Mischa to the ocean (*"the ocean means only oblivion - but Mischa can rest safely there, far from God's grasping reach"*) is intended to invoke the burial Hannibal gives Mischa in *Hannibal Rising* ("Mischa, we take comfort in knowing there is no God. That you are not enslaved in a Heaven, made to kiss God's ass forever. What you have is better than Paradise. You have blessed oblivion. I miss you every day."). No matter what happens, he will always be a teenage edgelord at heart ;)

Finally, the title *Not Like You Do* comes from Sour Times by Portishead, which I didn't mention earlier purely because I paraphrased the two most important lines right at the very end:

Because nobody loves me,
Not like you do

Thank you for joining me on the surprisingly large turn this once-little fic took - it is now, officially, the end :')

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading :) If you'd like to share this fic with your followers you can find it here on twitter or here on our tumblr blog. Kudos/comments are always welcome!

Find the timestamps series here. And for a complete list of all the stories and for easy viewing of all the art, we made a QS website.

I'm on tumblr and twitter (and very occasionally on pillowfort and dreamwidth).

I also write my own fiction which you can learn more about here.

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